

ALL STALIN'S MEN?  
SOLDIERLY MASCULINITIES IN THE SOVIET WAR EFFORT,  
1938-1945

BY  
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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the different but interconnected ways Soviet leaders and citizen-soldiers interpreted the Soviet war effort as a masculine endeavor. At the front, the entry of women into the ranks of combatants challenged not only men's preeminence, but also official and popular narratives of a masculine ethic of national defense that stretched back to the Russian Revolution. The chapters of this dissertation explore the ways in which masculine values and priorities from the 1930s persisted in the Red Army despite the distinguished service of female combatants and divisions among male soldiers, commanders, and propagandists. Motives and actions such as hating and killing, comradeship and revenge, or serving Stalin and using skill, appeared as exclusively masculine in frontline culture, in contrast to depictions of vulnerable women as non-combatants and passive victims in the civilian realm. Analyzing Russian archival materials, military newspapers, and soldiers' letters and memoirs, this study investigates the interaction and evolution of official and popular notions of soldiers and heroes as masculine subjects. This dissertation argues that divergent official and soldierly masculinities retained a common set of values that emphasized women's non-military nature and non-combatant roles as a way to preserve the gendered motivations established at the outset of the war. In order to challenge scholarship that presents catch-all sets of motives that operated throughout the war, this study focuses on civilian men's creative synthesis of influences from front life, soldier-specific propaganda, and small group combat dynamics into a soldierly identity. Made up of battle-tested fighters, the combat collective emerged as source of masculine affiliation separate from the national collective or soldiers' families. An examination of rank-and-file narratives, not just propaganda, reveals how ordinary soldiers participated in the creation of Red Army practices and values in wartime.

*To Mother and Father*

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## INTRODUCTION: FIGHTING MEN, SOVIET CULTURE, AND TOTAL WAR

On the eve of the Second World War, Red Army leaders feared that young men in the ranks were insufficiently masculine. In the middle of the war, they struggled with how successfully women combatants fought alongside Red Army men. In the war's final months, those same leaders worried that their men were too masculine as they rampaged through Germany. Gender shaped not only the Soviet government's approaches to mobilization, motivation, and morale, but also Red Army soldiers' subjectivities and sense of duty to comrades, family, and country. This dissertation argues that official and soldierly masculinities evolved in relation to one another while retaining a core exclusivity that denied equal status to women combatants. Propaganda directed specifically at soldiers consistently revised narratives of masculine heroism that ignored the existence of civilian men altogether. Fighting men expressed masculine subjectivities centered on the elite nature of their combat performance as an expression of exceptional skill, dedication, and toughness. While official and soldiers' sets of values rarely shared a common notion of sacrifice, duty, or even heroism, their mutual emphasis on the masculine nature of frontline service persisted as a commonality throughout the war. Frontline propaganda appeared responsive to the changing strategic situation, but never managed to anticipate major shifts in soldiers' motives for fighting. Instead, Red Army fighters, usually through indiscipline, contributed to shifts in policy and propaganda during the early, middle, and late stages of the war. A sense of masculine duty to family or bonds with comrades also contributed to why Red Army men fought. However, such loyalties to a local, rather than national, collective, also fueled discharge petitions and insubordinate acts. To support these claims, I analyze troops' letters, petitions, recollections, memoirs, and diaries, as well as official

rhetoric and policy that targeted soldiers in newspapers, leaders' speeches, propaganda directives, and military orders.

### **The Red Army and total war**

This study begins in July of 1938, rather than at the start of the German invasion in June of 1941. Examining the Red Army and related civilian training efforts during peacetime and small scale conflicts provides an essential frame of reference for understanding wartime changes. This border war period provides evidence of not only Soviet expectations and preparations for war, but actual reactions and reforms in response to fighting in different borderlands and on widely varying scales. Hundreds of thousands of Red Army troops saw battle in these conflicts, and Soviet political and military leaders faced real enemies and real problems that demanded difficult decisions in order to deal with a mixed operational record. Their choices, and soldiers' and young people's responses to limited war and mobilization, provide critical insights into the transition to war in Stalinist society and culture.

July of 1938 marks the outbreak of a month of fighting between the Red Army and Japanese forces in the Soviet Far East. Several military-organizational milestones also took place in 1938. The Red Army abolished national units and drafted its first fully multi-ethnic conscript cohort. Officer schools doubled in size and course duration was cut to prepare for army expansion. The remnants of the military purge or *Ezhovshchina* ended, and Lev Mekhlis, Stalin's hand-picked candidate, took charge of the political administration of the Red Army, or PUR.<sup>1</sup> Taken together, the events of 1938 provide a key starting point for studying the Soviet

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<sup>1</sup> On ethnic units, see Susan L. Curran and Dmitry Ponomareff, "Managing the Ethnic Factor in the Russian and Soviet Armed Forces: A Historical Overview," in *Ethnic Minorities in the Red Army: Asset or Liability?* ed. Alexander R. Alexiev et al. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988). On officer training school numbers and course duration and quality, see Roger Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 91. For an explanation of how military purges shifted from the Red Army leadership to middle-ranking officers and then ended entirely, see Roger Reese, *Red Commanders* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 121-131. On the

Union's final pre-invasion preparations. The bulk of the dissertation deals with the war years, 1941 to 1945, and concludes with the final year of fighting that culminated in the conquest of Berlin.

The Red Army that began to fight border wars in 1938 had been founded in 1918, but drew upon a considerable base of Tsarist practices, traditions, and personnel. Small groups of mostly urban volunteers and radicalized soldiers formed the nucleus of the new force, which first sought to defend the revolution from German aggression, before turning to face White forces in the Russian Civil War. Peasants comprised the vast majority of Red Army soldiers and even officers, and former Tsarist non-commissioned officers with acceptable social backgrounds rose to command positions. Communist Party members vigorously debated the nature and even existence of an army that could operate in accordance with revolutionary principles. Issues ranging from the legitimacy of rank structure and military discipline to the conscription of youth and role of female citizens divided Bolsheviks between those who favored military effectiveness and those who valued revolutionary principles. The primary military reason for the Red Army's victory in the Civil War lay with the superior mobilization and retention of peasant manpower.<sup>2</sup>

The post-Civil War Red Army underwent considerable restructuring, and developed out of a compromise between a conventional standing army and revolutionary citizens' militia at the Tenth Party Congress in 1921.<sup>3</sup> Soldiers' and officers training suffered because military effectiveness always coexisted with political objectives, in particular the recruitment of peasant cadres who would operate on behalf of the Communist Party after their service terms ended and

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Politburo's appointment of Mekhlis to PUR chief after he served as editor of Pravda for seven years, see Iurii Rubitsov, *Mekhlis. Ten' Vozhdia* [Mekhlis. Shadow Leader] (Moscow: Iauza, 2007), 149.

<sup>2</sup> Red Army success stemmed from a combination of organizational skill, geographic centrality, and a political agenda that appeared as the lesser of evils to many peasants. Orlando Figes, "The Red Army and Mass Mobilization during the Russian Civil War 1918-1920," *Past and Present*, No. 129 (Nov 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Roger Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 9.



they returned to the countryside.<sup>4</sup> Red Army leaders collaborated with their German counterparts in the 1920s, but proved the more innovative strategic thinkers, with a group surrounding Marshall Mikhail Tukhachevskii conceiving of “deep operations” as a means of applying new military technology to achieve decisive victory. The Red Army eventually began to mechanize, especially in response to the Manchurian crisis in 1931, and retained priority status in industrial planning after the Nazi takeover in Germany in 1933.<sup>5</sup> Training and staffing problems persisted among non-commissioned officers and lieutenants, and morale and discipline remained low among mostly peasant conscripts. Compounding these issues, the Red Army suffered a serious blow to its strategic leadership during the purges of 1937-1938. On the eve of new conflicts, the Red Army remained split between pursuing political and security objectives, which new reforms addressed tangentially at best.

The German invasion of June 1941 began with great initial success, crossing the Dniepr River and capturing Minsk, Riga, and Smolensk in less than a month. However, Soviet defenders made up for leadership and organizational failures with tenacious resistance, which slowed the German advance, achieving particular defensive success on the southwestern front. German forces failed to seize Moscow and Leningrad in 1941, despite capturing a vast expanse of Soviet territory, which marked the failure of the German invasion plan, called Operation Barbarossa. The Soviet Union began to prepare for total war, having evacuated as much of its industry and population as possible, and mobilized vast numbers of new soldiers, including tens of thousands of women.

The year 1942 began with Soviet offensives to drive the Germans back from Moscow and establish strong bridgeheads over the Donets river. Soviet spring offensives aimed at liberating

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<sup>4</sup> Mark von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> David R. Stone, *Hammer and Rifle* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

Khar'kov and eastern Ukraine failed completely, and the Germans quickly capitalized by launching a large scale offensive in the south at the end of June. After a month of steady German advance, Joseph Stalin issued an order, number 227 for the year, to deal with perceived problems of morale, division-level leadership, and discipline. Citing effective German measures of a similar kind from the winter campaign, Stalin instituted blocking units and penalty battalions to discourage and punish further retreat. Blocking units consisted of specially selected soldiers, often with secret police backgrounds, ordered to detain or kill troops retreating without orders, while penalty battalions collected servicemen found guilty of unauthorized retreat or other acts of indiscipline. Penalty battalions often undertook dangerous and even suicidal missions as a means of forced combat redemption, but offered a slim chance of return to the regular ranks for those who survived. The phrase 'not a step back', which Stalin emphasized as the order's primary message, would epitomize the Soviet Union's desperate defensive determination.

While holding the line on the central and northern sectors, the Germans advanced southeast throughout the summer and reached Stalingrad on the Volga river. After months of street fighting, German forces failed to capture the city, and a Red Army counter-offensive encircled the attackers and recaptured large swathes of territory by year's end. The New Year saw Soviet offensives after the capture of Stalingrad fail on all three fronts, but these efforts exhausted German forces in the process. After successfully defending their positions around Rzhev, for example, German forces undertook a staged withdrawal to consolidate their defenses further west. Fighting around Kursk brought the first defeat of a German offensive in summer campaigning weather, leading to the liberation of much of central Russia and eastern Ukraine that fall, culminating in the liberation of Kiev in November.

The mid-point of the war saw women's and non-Slavic soldiers' combat roles surge, before the liberation of occupied territories provided new reserves of manpower and the incorporation of partisan units into the regular forces. Winter and spring offensives liberated the Crimea, southwest Ukraine, and broke the German lines south of Leningrad, driving to Novgorod and territory beyond. Greater supplies of heavy weapons helped balance declining Soviet manpower reserves, and more mechanized but undersized Red Army units began to cross into foreign territory for the first time in the spring of 1944. The Red Army marked the third anniversary of the German invasion with a massive offensive to liberate Belarus, followed by a drive through the western Balkans and north into Hungary. After a protracted siege of Budapest and drive through the Baltic States, the year ended with Soviet territory totally liberated and the Germans in full retreat. The winter of 1945 brought final offensives into Germany, Austria, and the Czech lands, which culminated in the fall of Berlin, and total victory, in May.

### **Claims**

In a recent article, historian Catherine Merridale poses the question "Did gender matter in the Soviet army?" in her title. This dissertation unequivocally argues that it mattered more than the categories of generation, culture, or rank that Merridale posits as having been crucial. Appeals to masculine duty had a unifying potential across those categories while marginalizing men of any type who failed to perform as combatants. At the front, official rhetoric and the rank-and-file's expression of soldierly subjectivities employed masculine values and language to discuss competing notions of heroism, skill, sacrifice, revenge, and unit cohesion. Soldiers' responses to military service and soldier specific propaganda were far more complex and personal than the categories of support or opposition to Stalinism that historians often use to

interpret them.<sup>6</sup> Instead, this dissertation argues that the relationship between the masculine subjectivities of combatants and the heroic ideals and behavioral scripts that appeared in soldier-specific propaganda was dynamic and interactive. Each set of gender ideas adapted to the other and to changing wartime circumstances, which verifies historian Anna Krylova's findings that Stalinism provided individuals with incomplete model selves to aim to inhabit.<sup>7</sup> In order to challenge scholarship that presents catch-all sets of motives that operated throughout the war, this study focuses on civilian men's creative synthesis of influences from front life, soldier-specific propaganda, and small group combat dynamics into a soldierly identity.<sup>8</sup>

I argue that soldiers' ambivalent response to official rhetoric at the front in favor of developing relationships with their fellow combatants reveals clear limits to Soviet citizens' drive to affiliate themselves exclusively with the national collective that historian Jochen Hellbeck has described among civilians in the 1930s.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, soldiers did not await propaganda cues, access the integral brutality instilled in them by all aspects of Soviet life, or follow the slow, methodical drive of a traditional Russian way of war.<sup>10</sup> The grassroots

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<sup>6</sup> Mark von Hagen, "Soviet Soldiers and Officers on the Eve of the German Invasion: Toward a Description of Social Psychology and Political Attitudes," in *The People's War: Responses to World War II in the Soviet Union*, ed. Robert W. Thurston et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Robert W. Thurston, "Cauldrons of Loyalty and Betrayal: Soviet Soldiers' Behavior, 1941 and 1945," in *The People's War*; Catherine Merridale, "Culture, Ideology and Combat in the Red Army, 1939-1945," *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 41 no. 2 (2006).

<sup>7</sup> Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 24-27.

<sup>8</sup> Suzanne Ament, "Reflecting Individual and Collective Identities - Songs of World War II," in *Gender and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Russian Culture*, ed. Helena Goscilo et al. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006); Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945* (New York: Picador, 2006), 124-127; Roger Reese, "Motivations to Serve: The Soviet Soldier in the Second World War," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 20 no. 2 (2007).

<sup>9</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> On the role of propaganda, Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 166-186; on the unleashing of the Soviet system's integral brutality, built up over a quarter century, see Amir Weiner, "Something to Die For, a Lot to Kill for," in *The Barbarization of Warfare*, ed. George Kassimeris (New York: NYU University Press, 2006); on the Russian way of war, Richard Overy, *Russia's war* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 213-216, and Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 113-115.

development of combat collectives within combat units shaped Red Army frontline culture and soldiers' approaches to violence. Soldierly subjectivities developed alongside loyalties to these groups of combatants who shared frontline hardship and danger. The values and practices of those who survived early engagements shaped the norms of recruits and replacements that joined them later. Survival and success in combat bred a certain level of elitism into combat collectives, which manifested itself in exclusion and disdain for non-combatants, risk-averse officers, and most women at the front. Combatant solidarities created loyalties outside the chain of command, which were manifest in efforts to cover-up insubordinate or illegal acts ranging from petty theft and disobeying orders to rape in the war's final months.

Wartime propaganda and culture are perhaps the most studied non-operational aspect of the war, but such studies consistently neglect soldier-specific content. I challenge the prevailing scholarly consensus about the significance of Soviet victory at Stalingrad as a turning point in wartime culture.<sup>11</sup> Rather than dividing the war into a period of "breathing space" followed by the return of 1930s "normalcy," I argue propaganda remained purposeful before Stalingrad and flexible afterward.<sup>12</sup> A close reading of the Red Army newspaper *Krasnaia Zvezda* [Red Star] reveals that official rhetoric aimed a very different message to frontline soldiers than to civilians on the home front, and sought to constantly adapt to perceived changes to the military situation and soldiers' apparent morale shifts. Soldier specific propaganda employed soldier heroes and their exploits, whether real or embellished, to provide fighters and political workers with

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<sup>11</sup> John Barber, "The Image of Stalin in Soviet Propaganda and Public Opinion during World War 2," in *World War 2 and the Soviet People*, in ed. John Garrard et al. (London: St. Marten's Press, 1993); Jeffrey Brooks, "Pravda Goes to War," in *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*, ed. Richard Stites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Krylova, chapter 6; Richard Stites, "Introduction," in *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*. For an early effort to challenge this periodization, see Lisa Kirschenbaum, "Our City, Our Homes, Our Families: Local Loyalties and Private Life in Soviet World War II Propaganda," *Slavic Review* 59 no. 4 (2000).

<sup>12</sup> Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 220-224; Stephen M. Norris, *War of Images: Russian Popular Prints, Wartime Culture, and National Identity, 1812-1945* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 179-185.

examples of motives, goals, and expectations that featured masculine qualities and duties.

Historians Karel Berkhoff and Catherine Merridale have argued that such efforts were part of Soviet wartime propaganda's success in creating a unifying and inspirational narrative.<sup>13</sup> I use soldiers' wartime responses to demonstrate how propaganda actually constituted only a partial source for soldiers' understanding of wartime changes, and often provided an unintended basis for soldiers to make claims on the state.

Overall, soldier-specific propaganda and combat collective-generated frontline culture influenced each other. Their shared masculine perspective provided the greatest source of commonality, and both accepted a version of the idea of a masculine ethic of defense with origins in the Russian Civil War.<sup>14</sup> I argue that this mutual influence and common masculinity is most apparent in the depiction and treatment of women in the Red Army. On this point, I disagree with Krylova's otherwise compelling study, which argues that a non-oppositional construction of frontline gender identities took place during the war and informed the sense of duty Soviet women combatants possessed as a "front generation."<sup>15</sup> I instead seek to demonstrate the persistence of old gender ideas surrounding military service in soldier-specific propaganda and among male troops, neither of which ever accepted the entry of women into the fighting ranks on a large scale.

Official and soldierly perspectives interacted as a masculine bloc, modulating and responding to developments while preserving combatant status as an elite masculine role. The masculinity of fighting men appeared in contrast to women by omitting any coverage of two

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<sup>13</sup> Karel Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 65, 277; Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 63-65, 229-230.

<sup>14</sup> On the masculine values of the Russian Civil War see Joshua Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002). For the postwar characterization of that conflict as a masculine endeavor in Soviet culture during the 1920s, see Eliot Borenstein, *Men without Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Krylova, 3-4.

wartime roles: men outside the military and women combatants who killed the enemy and were accepted members of their combat units. Troops' combat collectives developed in opposition to the women they left at home and engaged through letters, and then greeted women at the front with sexual harassment, scorn, or at best pity. With only nurses, supportive relatives, and victims of enemy violence appearing in soldier-specific propaganda, male combatants had few reasons to expect or accept that women came to the front with the same motives and capabilities as them. I argue that the masculine bloc preserved an exclusive and hierarchical frontline culture across the boundary of official and popular values and norms.

### **Theory**

Much scholarship has examined the role of revolutionary ideology in everyday practice, and how Soviet citizens utilized it for self-identification and self-presentation.<sup>16</sup> Soviet ideology could hold genuine appeal for citizens and inspire identity-formation in pursuit of a collectively harmonized life.<sup>17</sup> While the state structured citizens' interactions with official ideology, individuals embraced these definitions of social identity at different times and for various reasons. In analyzing how individuals' writings interacted with ideology, I also draw from Eric Naiman's approach to "how the ideological text is read and absorbed by its consumers," in which he asserts that such texts "provide a glimpse at the process by which individual subjects were shaped and by which official discourse transformed and was transformed by individual bodies and minds."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*.

<sup>17</sup> Kotkin and Hellbeck diverge on these points, with Hellbeck focusing on how individuals tried to adapt themselves to the collective.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Naiman, "Discourse Made Flesh: Healing and Terror in the Construction of Soviet Subjectivities," in *Language and Revolution: Making Modern Political Identities*, ed. Igal Halfin (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), 219.

Historians have given limited attention to the roles gender and extreme wartime experiences could play in shaping Soviet subjectivities. Anna Krylova's work provides the pioneering exception, in which she argues that young women soldiers "actively engaged in the construction of their identities and exhibited similarities in their thinking through Stalinist [gender] ambiguities."<sup>19</sup> However, it is not only women's writing that explores the relationships between men and women, battle front and home front, and the individual and the state in wartime. To examine the masculine subjectivities of Red Army men based on Krylova's premise, I adapt the approaches employed by historians of British troops' experiences of total war, which is arguably the most developed body of English-language scholarship on soldiers' writings. I concur with gender historian Michael Roper that soldiers' writings, not just their actions at the front, constitute a site of gender performance, in which the precariousness of masculinity at the level of lived experience is apparent.<sup>20</sup> In particular, Roper demonstrates the importance of relationships with comrades and correspondence with family in shaping soldiers' subjectivities.

I also engage Roper's assertion that the incorporation of subjectivity into the study of gender restores the importance of personal relationships and emotions, especially in as intense an experience as war.<sup>21</sup> My approach to sources builds on British historian Jessica Meyer's insistence that any analysis of the cultural scripts and lived experiences "which men drew on to define their individual identities as soldiers and as men" must rest upon a close reading of a

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<sup>19</sup> Krylova, 26.

<sup>20</sup> Roper draws his understanding of performativity from Judith Butler's work. Michael Roper, "Maternal Relations: moral manliness and emotional survival in letters home during the First World War," in *Masculinities in Politics and War* ed. Stefan Dudnik, et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 301-302.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Roper, "Slipping out of View: Subjectivity and Emotion in Gender History," *History Workshop Journal* 59 (Spring 2005): 59-61.



variety of types of personal narratives.<sup>22</sup> Following Meyer and Roper, I focus on the writings of Red Army men at the front as a matter of active negotiation between the competing influences of official ideology, personal relationships, prewar expectations, and frontline experiences. The outbreak of war and its turbulent strategic developments challenged both official scripts and personal views of how men and women fit into distant families, military hierarchies, primary groups, and civilian communities.

My study draws from several scholars, theories, and histories of masculinity and the construction of categories of gender difference. I consider gender identity as a dynamic process, performed over time in relation to cultural ideas about “male” and “female” identities.<sup>23</sup> Gender historian Joan Scott emphasizes the importance of studying how hierarchies of gender are constructed or legitimized.<sup>24</sup> Michael Kimmel’s work highlights how men could make up more than ninety percent of the Red Army, and yet they have scarcely been considered as men.<sup>25</sup> George Mosse identifies masculinity as central to modern political and national ideologies because it represented an ideal of both body and soul.<sup>26</sup> I also incorporate Kathleen Canning’s assertion that studying gender demands the “positing of a reciprocal relationship between ideologies and experience of gender that were lived and assigned meaning differently by male and female actors.”<sup>27</sup> I adapt elements of all these approaches to examine masculinity and gender hierarchy within the Red Army’s frontline culture.

The sociological masculinities theory of R.W. Connell informs my study of the interaction of frontline propaganda and Red Army soldiers’ subjectivities. I combine Connell’s

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<sup>22</sup> She treats soldiers’ letters home, diaries, condolence letters, pension petitions, and memoirs as separate narrative forms. Jessica Meyer, *Men of war: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 10-13.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xv.

<sup>24</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>25</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, *The History of Men* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>26</sup> George Mosse, *The Image of Man* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1-5.

<sup>27</sup> Kathleen Canning, *Gender History in Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 62.

framework with combat effectiveness theories from military history to understand both the connection between different notions of men's ideal roles in wartime and the relationship between men's and women's gender roles. This approach to gender is particularly useful for engaging soldiers' subjectivities amidst the informal hierarchies and inconsistent female presence that characterized the Red Army at war. I seek to engage the role of "social practice" in relationships between individuals in forming subjectivities to consider the ways in which gendered subjectivities deviated from official norms and models.<sup>28</sup> Adapting these approaches to a wartime context, I examine how individual combatants responded to gendered military-patriotic official discourse in the reconstruction of their own identities. Connell's revised formulation of the hierarchical relationship of genders distinguishes between "internal" and "external" masculine hegemony: the internal domination over subordinate masculinities that do not contribute to the maintenance of patriarchy, which reinforces external domination over the "emphasized femininity" defined in contradistinction.<sup>29</sup>

Gender theorist Demetrakis Demetriou, in a revision of Connell's work, explains that such a reformulation of hegemonic masculinity is best understood as the reordering of different elements of a "masculine bloc," rather than a single masculinity constructed in relation to femininity alone.<sup>30</sup> The masculine bloc describes a process of constant hybridization and incorporation of "diverse elements from various masculinities that makes the hegemonic bloc capable of reconfiguring itself and adapting to the specificities of new historical conjunctures."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 26:6 (December 2005): 843.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 847-848.

<sup>30</sup> Demetrakis Z. Demetriou, "Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity: A critique," *Theory and Society*, Vol. 30 No. 3 (2001): 343.

<sup>31</sup> Demetriou, 348.

This distinction is particularly useful for understanding Soviet wartime gender dynamics, in which official and popular masculinities diverged, interacted, and borrowed from each other, but never differed in their assertion of an alternately passive, subordinate, or victimized feminine opposite and subordinate to the soldier-hero ideal.

By employing a theory of dynamic gender norms and subjectivities, I argue that gender ideals and gendered subjectivities changed multiple times during the war. I identify these changes to soldierly masculinity based on relationships with family, other men, other women, state officials, military command, as well as soldiers' sense of duty or reason for living in war. This approach differs from scholarship that identifies a single positive soldierly masculinity or fixed set of masculinities that operate for the duration of the conflict.<sup>32</sup> Focusing on gender change allows for a thorough examination of the instability that not only war but women's entry into the fighting ranks brought to Soviet gender constructions, as well as the adaptation and persistence of masculine values and subjectivities.

Identifying such consistent gender change matters because it played a central role in the interaction between individuals' masculine subjectivities and the ideals official rhetoric promoted through its soldier heroes. I consider gender change as part of the process of (re-)forming subjectivities at the front and self-shaping in response to experiences of war. Likewise, official ideals and objectives appeared as moving targets throughout the war, which contributed to the divergence between official and soldierly masculinities. Even for the military sub-group of the Soviet population, the pace of change in masculine ideals meant that there were multiple

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<sup>32</sup> For a single wartime masculinity, see Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 153-159; for a fixed set that persist throughout the war, see Christina Jarvis, *The male body at war: American masculinity during World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004).

scripts for individuals to adopt in any given year of the war, in addition to the competing influence of comrades, family, and wartime experiences.

A binary gender configuration persisted in frontline culture after women joined the ranks of combatants in significant numbers in 1942. Wartime binaries operated between front and rear, soldier and civilian, combatant and auxiliary, and primary group and replacement soldiers, to name the most relevant to the Red Army. Several factors help explain this, including how women joined the Red Army and how gender binaries operated in Soviet culture outside the military. Soviet women first entered the Red Army in 1941 in small numbers as non-combatants, such as nurses, medics, doctors, signalers, and in auxiliary services such as cooking and laundry. Women first entered ground combat as individual volunteers, usually scattered alone among different units on different fronts. Throughout the war, women concentrated in a few branches of arms, especially the infantry specializations of sniper and machine gunner and the celebrated military aviation roles of fighter and bomber crews. As a result, fighting men, especially tankers and artillerymen, had limited firsthand experience with women combatants. Rumors and stereotypes usually prejudiced the few encounters that took place, leading them to treat women as unworthy comrades-in-arms.

The larger structure of Soviet men's reactions can be understood as analogous to the dynamics of women's entry into skilled industrial jobs a decade earlier. As historian Wendy Goldman explains: "Male peasant migrants brought patriarchal and conservative views of women into the workplace. They were not alone in their hostility: men at every level of industry reacted strongly to the regendering policy. And Soviet women fought back."<sup>33</sup> In the Red Army of the early 1940s, patriarchal values were long-established. Likewise, young women usually had higher expectations and better training before pursuing military careers than did those

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<sup>33</sup> Wendy Goldman, *Women at the Gates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 208.

women attempting to secure factory jobs. In the crisis of the Winter War, women's first efforts to volunteer resulted in token positions, which ran parallel to their sisters' and mothers' struggles in the workforce:

Women, however, were rarely admitted into the apprenticeships that opened up access to more skilled positions. They worked in "support" or janitorial services – cleaning, mopping, loading, and hauling – rather than in production. ... Soviet labor analysts in the 1920s and 1930s explained women's concentration at the bottom of the industrial hierarchy as a consequence of their family responsibilities, poor education, and physical weakness.<sup>34</sup>

Local military committee members' responses to volunteers, as well as official rhetoric, used similar reasoning to justify women's limited options. During the Great Patriotic war, after women reached the front in numbers, the attitude of men in the ranks and command positions played the critical role in preserving a gender binary.

Soldiers expressed their view of women's legitimacy and status relative to men the same way Soviet workers had, whereby

Men in many jobs had difficulty conceiving of women as workmates rather than sexual partners, and the atmosphere at work was often tense. Men frequently regarded women's presence not only as an infringement of their privileges as male workers but also as a sexual transgression, and their resentment in turn took on a sexualized form. They subjected women to sexual advances and obscenities expressly intended to force them off the job.<sup>35</sup>

Fighting men's prejudices about women soldiers needed no basis in fact or observation to drive their behavior, and received minimal challenge or criticism from frontline propaganda. Male troops consistently found some grounds to disqualify women as equal combatants, usually sexual, with little concern for double standards or women's actual capabilities. Women's expressions of a feminine soldierly subjectivity, or justified pride in their military accomplishments could not overcome the prejudice of many of their fellow fighters. Women's

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<sup>34</sup> Goldman, 213.

<sup>35</sup> Goldman, 227.

participation did not preclude a gender binary from operating in the Red Army because too many fighting men understood their military service in precisely that way. Moreover, soldiers and frontline propaganda articulated the masculine nature of military duty more thoroughly and frequently because of women's arrival at the front. Women's presence also encouraged them to adapt in order to preserve their elite status in the hierarchy of contributions to the war effort.

### **Methodology and Sources**

To study Red Army troops' views and their interaction with official rhetoric, I examine a variety of wartime and retrospective soldiers' writings. Contemporary sources consist primarily of letters, which include a variety of subcategories. Memoirs and interview recollections comprise the retrospective sources. I use both types in order to maximize the amount of material analyzed, and to balance the character of response to front experiences. Wartime writings provide an immediate reaction to developments at the front, and reflect the emotions, sensory experiences, and details surrounding events that were only hours or days old. Postwar recollections offer combatants' perspectives with the benefit of time to make their own interpretations, knowledge of the larger sequence of events involved, and a developed sense of their own and their comrades' spectrum of experiences and behavior in wartime. These different attributes allow me to consider a greater number of questions and engage them in greater depth than would be possible with either type alone.

Letters from the front provide access to the greatest number of soldiers writing to the greatest variety of audiences and for the greatest number of reasons. That is not to say that letters constitute an unproblematic source. Aside from a small number that appear in published document collections, letters confiscated by NKVD censors remain classified and absent from Russian archives, so the available pool necessarily excludes personal letters with content deemed

defeatist or anti-Soviet. I attempt to deal with this in two ways: showing the diversity and deviations that persist in uncensored letters, and including soldiers' letters to government officials or institutions, which were not archived separately by soldier as was done with personal correspondence.<sup>36</sup>

Self-censorship represents a further problem with soldiers' letters. I attempt to address self-censorship by tracking how the same troops broached a new subject after months or years of silence to gain a sense of which experiences or reactions were likely relevant earlier but absent due to self-censorship, and which were limited to certain phases or fronts of the war. With such shifts or reversals in mind, I consider how soldiers' refusal to discuss certain topics at certain times constitutes part of their expression of masculinity, rather than treat it as a total barrier to understanding.<sup>37</sup> I also reviewed letters for themes in common with my reading of postwar memoirs and interviews, in which veterans who opted to share their stories were more likely to be forthright about subjects that they seldom addressed in correspondence at the front. These approaches only alleviate the problem of self-censorship, leaving certain opinions permanently private.

I scrutinized a sample consisting of approximately six thousand soldiers' letters stored in Russian archives. The number of letters a single soldier produced ranged from 1 to over 900, but the average was around five and often a single letter or petition. The organization of Russian archives prohibited the creation of a representative sample of soldiers based on different categories because such information was rarely available and the level of detail inconsistent.

Outright errors in categorization further complicate any effort at organizing a sample letter

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<sup>36</sup> Mark Edele takes a similar approach to the range of opinions present in postwar reports on veterans' opinions. See Mark Edele, "More than just Stalinists: The political sentiments of victors, 1945-1953," in *Late Stalinist Russia: Society between reconstruction and reinvention*, ed. Juliane Furst (New York: Routledge, 2006), 172.

<sup>37</sup> For further discussion of this approach, see the discussion of Michael Roper's reading of masculinity in soldiers' letters in the Theory section.

authors. As a result, I focused on maximizing the breadth of soldier-letter authors studied. I sought breadth in prewar social categories of education, political affiliation, profession, social origin, ethnicity, marital status, and age, as well as military categories including rank, prewar training, voluntary or conscripted service, branch of arms (mortars, artillery, armored forces, snipers, etc.), fronts, and start date of combat service.

Building on this breadth of soldier types and experiences, I adapt Sarah Davies' approach to analyzing Soviet public opinion in Communist Party and secret policy reports or *svodki*. Davies' method of analyzing popular views in the Stalinist 1930s proceeds from the premise that "the obstacles to reaching any reliable quantitative conclusions," make a focus on "typical and recurring themes," as well as the contingency of different views, the most fruitful approach.<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, I opt for a broad focus on the subordinate groups of the military in general, rather than one particular rank level or a few social categories because the opinions soldiers expressed were not specific to those categories. I analyze letters for common language and concerns across groups while remaining attentive to specific group interests when they appear. In addition to what soldiers write about, I pay particular attention to when they write about them, especially in relation to when similar ideas figured prominently in propaganda.

This study focuses on soldiers' views as a particularly valuable element of the Soviet population's responses to the war effort. Red Army men were at once subject to propaganda and surveillance but arguably less susceptible to coercion (since German bullets were just as deadly as those of the NKVD and blocking units). Troops faced the greatest exposure to danger and expectations from the state of the unoccupied Soviet population, making their opinions and

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<sup>38</sup> Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, propaganda, and dissent, 1934-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 11-13.



motivations worthy of examination separately from those of their civilian counterparts.<sup>39</sup> High losses and battlefield promotions based on combat merit brought many men of limited education and literacy into the ranks of sergeants and lieutenants, thereby blurring the social distinctions between leaders and led in companies and even battalions. Frontline realities further diminished these barriers, since officers of all ranks were expected to act as a personal example for soldiers to follow, in battle and non-combat behavior, and shared most of the danger and hardship that their men faced.

In order to minimize the impact of a particular genre of writing, type of recipient, level of state surveillance, or reason for archival preservation on my interpretations, I analyze different types of documents, usually archived separately. These consist of soldiers' letters and diaries, submitted by families and surviving veterans, junior officers' diaries, submitted at the conclusion of their service, petitions to various state and military agencies and leaders, retained by those agencies or offices, and letters intended for families and comrades but sent to the state radio committee for broadcast, which the committee preserved, whether or not such programs gave them voice on-air.<sup>40</sup> This approach enables an identification of trends across types of letters so that their content cannot be attributed to genre, self-censorship, instrumentalized rhetorical appeals, or other such structural factors alone.

My approach to memoirs and interview recollections likewise focuses on maximizing the breadth of types of veterans considered, based on factors such as prewar social group, communist party status, and branch of arms. I treat memoirs and interviews as rhetorically constructed texts and examine them for veterans' choices in self-representation. Although postwar texts focus

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<sup>39</sup> For analysis of popular moods and social psychology in the Soviet rear, see *The People's War*.

<sup>40</sup> The Komsomol section of the Russia State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) contains letters to family, diaries, oaths to comrades, and volunteer requests. The Russian State Military Archive (RGVA) holds letters to family, officers' diaries, and letters to frontline newspapers. The State Archive of the Russian Federation's (GARF) collection includes letters to the state radio committee and petitions to state institutions and leaders.

more on military events than those written in wartime, both types involve clear efforts to affiliate themselves with some groups and contrast themselves with others, whether fellow soldiers or non-combatants, families or officers, men or women. Postwar sources also tend to focus more on combat details and women at the front, likely because the former proved problematic with censorship, while the latter would have raised uncomfortable questions from the largely female recipients of letters. I engage only post-Soviet material not only to avoid the censorship of sensitive topics such as rape or order 227, but also because those Soviet-era memoirs tend to provide highly impersonal operational narratives. Quantitatively, I examined over a hundred and twenty soldiers' memoirs and interviews, which is a much smaller number than the number of letters engaged, but postwar sources are consistently much longer than individual wartime texts. The memoirs and interviews of Red Army veterans therefore provide a crucial source for the rhetorical construction of masculine subjectivities in response to frontline experiences and especially the development of wartime relationships.

I analyze the interaction between soldiers' views and official rhetoric by focusing on soldier-specific propaganda. By this I mean the content that political workers and journalists produced, in speech and in print, for the specific audience of Red Army personnel. This propaganda narrowly sought to affect the morale, discipline, and motivation of the troops, and provided content about the rear or non-military subjects only when it might have a bearing on the aforementioned three factors. Recurring articles even provided direct examples of how political workers should use newspapers to agitate among their men. My concern here is to trace the interaction between troops' and officials' ideas about soldierly masculinity, and focus on sources most relevant to examining contingent propaganda content about soldiers and military facets of the war effort. I consider the different propaganda sources studied to account for many of the

differences among existing studies on wartime culture and between those studies and the claims I make.<sup>41</sup> However, I judge military propaganda to be a critical element of wartime culture, and more essential than civilian-oriented content to studying the interconnection of soldiers' culture official ideals of military service in wartime.

To this end, I analyze content primarily produced by military officers or PUR staff about frontline life and combat and intended for frontline soldiers. The primary source of such soldier-specific propaganda is the main Red Army newspaper, *Krasnaia Zvezda*, supplemented by smaller frontline newspapers, military orders, and the unpublished speeches of political commissars, which reached frontline soldiers most consistently. In fact, as the mass-circulation newspaper of the front, *Krasnaia Zvezda* served as the temporary news source for liberated regions in 1943, and received the Communist Party Central Committee's approval for a temporary increase in its circulation numbers for that purpose.<sup>42</sup> I content that the presumed or imagined all-male audience of frontline propaganda increases its value as a source for masculine ideals that marginalized non-military aspects of the war effort. A small amount of official rhetoric that I include appeared in front and rear alike, especially Stalin's and other Soviet leaders' published speeches. I also favor newspapers and printed propaganda materials over visual and auditory forms, such as films, plays, and songs, since studies of these aspects of wartime culture have great difficulty approximating how frequently and how widely they reached the front.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See the works cited above: Barber, "The Image of Stalin in Soviet Propaganda and Public Opinion during World War 2," Brooks, "Pravda goes to War," Kirschenbaum, "Our Cities, Our Homes, Our Families," and Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat*.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from the deputy head of the Central Committee's propaganda and agitation administration, A. Puzin, to the head of the PUR, A. Shcherbakov, 29 September 1943. RGASPI Fond 17 Opis 125 Delo 193 List 149.

<sup>43</sup> See Ament, "Reflecting Individual and Collective Identities - Songs of World War II," and Stites, "Introduction."

I omit the main Soviet newspapers, *Pravda*, *Izvestiia*, and *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, despite other scholars' use of them in studies of wartime culture. Including those sources would present a different facet of wartime propaganda. These rear newspapers targeted a much more diverse audience engaged primarily in the non-combat facets of the Soviet war effort. Accordingly, their coverage of the war effort gave considerable space to industrial and agricultural production, as well as donation drives and other volunteer work. Their depiction of the war effort, especially that of *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, built on prewar coverage of young women's combat skills and civil defense training and presented the successes of women in combat with a frequency completely unseen in frontline propaganda. Though affected by stricter discipline and threatened by enemy aerial bombardment, Soviet citizens in the rear were not expected to fight and kill the enemy, and the propaganda that targeted them reflected the desired outcomes for those more militarized, but still civilian roles. Front newspapers and soldier specific propaganda worked to motivate new and existing soldiers to succeed in combat, and therefore demand primary attention in a study of official ideals' and soldierly subjectivities' interaction.

I focus on heroic figures as central to the construction and dissemination of masculine ideals to Red Army soldiers. Heroes are particularly valuable for a study of Soviet masculinities because of their larger significance in the creation of "new men" in Soviet culture. They provided a key prewar precedent as examples of qualities and behavior that would inspire individual citizens to achieve their own potential, and then as examples of what Stalin's leadership and inspiration could make possible.<sup>44</sup> In wartime, heroes are perhaps more valuable, since they still fulfilled the aforementioned purpose, and appeared continuously due to the

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<sup>44</sup> On heroes as examples to motivate individual achievement, see Hellbeck, 29-30. For Stalin's role in inspiring, either symbolically or directly, the heroic new men of the 1930s, see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 125-129.

official press' need to provide positive news stories without military success to report and paranoia about providing the enemy intelligence through coverage of victories that did occur.<sup>45</sup>

Scholarship on Soviet culture, with or without a particular focus on gender, has also considered heroes to be useful objects of study for understanding policies and values.<sup>46</sup>

Further precedents can be found for such an approach in several facets of masculinities scholarship. The work of Graham Dawson on British masculinity has demonstrated how hero stories can be analyzed as “a means of imagining alternative forms of masculinity” and “possibilities for a masculine self, which men may strive to become more like.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, classics scholar Thomas Van Nortwick has demonstrated the importance of literary heroes in the conception of ideals of masculinity in ancient Greek culture, which reveal “expressions of masculine power” as well as “limitation[s] on masculine agency.”<sup>48</sup> Karen Hagemann’s work on masculinity and heroism demonstrates the importance of heroic figures in a given national culture, since they “were supposed to act as role models for 'average men' and in this way define the norms of masculinity to which the state, the military and society aspired.”<sup>49</sup> Other scholars of masculinity and war or military institutions pay little attention to heroes, but structure their studies differently or deal with military contexts or civilian cultures in ways unsuited to a focus on heroes. For example, Christina Jarvis’ study of American martial masculinity examines depictions of bodies, which relies heavily on visual media that depict anonymous soldier figures

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<sup>45</sup> On the comprehensiveness of censorship, see Berkhoff, 51-53.

<sup>46</sup> The most salient example is Karen Petrone in “Masculinity and Heroism in Imperial and Soviet Military-Patriotic Cultures,” in *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, ed. Barbara Evans Clements et al. (London Palgrave MacMillan, 2001). Also see her larger study of Stalinist culture: Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000). On civilian heroes and gender norms strongly promoted in the press, see Mary Buckley, *Mobilizing Soviet Peasants* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006) and Choi Chaterjee, *Celebrating Women* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002).

<sup>47</sup> Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes* (New York, Routledge, 1994), 15-23.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Van Nortwick, *Imagining Men* (Westport: Praeger, 2008), 156-157.

<sup>49</sup> Karen Hagemann, “German heroes: the cult of the death for the fatherland in nineteenth-century Germany,” in *Masculinities in Politics and War*, ed. Stefan Dudnik et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 116-117.

or general types, rather than individual heroes.<sup>50</sup> The work of both Drew Gilpin Faust and Michael Roper focus on aspects of military culture, individual correspondence and the culture of death and loss respectively, for which a lengthy study of heroes would hold little relevance.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, historian of the French military culture Leonard Smith considers soldiers' obedience at the divisional level and their narratives of tragedy and trauma, where heroism, especially in official narratives, had a negligible impact.<sup>52</sup>

### **Plan of the Narrative**

Chapter 1 examines the evolution of ideas and practices of Soviet military duty from the Russian Civil War and Stalin era in response to actual armed conflict in the late 1930s. The role of military service as a formative masculine experience in relation to men's life stages receives particular attention, alongside reforms that sought to expand military duties beyond the barracks in a gendered manner. Chapter 2 explores the focus on devotion to the collective and individual sacrifice that appeared in official rhetoric in response to the invasion crisis of June 1941. It simultaneously demonstrates that men's responses to the invasion revealed a sharply divergent notion of what they owed the state without rejecting the idea of a masculine obligation to defend the country. Chapter 3 asserts that violence emerged as the definitive element of ideals of soldierly conduct and soldierly subjectivity during the second year of the war. It also considers women's ambiguous roles at the front in the context of fighting men reorienting their sense of self to the reality of the front and expressing stronger ties to their comrades. Chapter 4 focuses on the centrality of revenge as a personal and national motive that appeared as an exclusively

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<sup>50</sup> Jarvis, 13-15.

<sup>51</sup> However, it is worth noting that both works devote a small section to heroism, to the extent it is relevant to their larger methods and themes. Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering* (New York: Knopf, 2008); Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

<sup>52</sup> Leonard Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), and *The Embattled Self* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

masculine prerogative, which contributed to a hierarchy of not only roles, but also nationalities, within the war effort. The chapter also identifies how a revenge culture expressed through burial rituals celebrated masculine qualities as necessary to survive the dangers and hardships of life at the front. Chapter 5 presents the war's final phase of conquest as the culmination of wartime cultural developments within official rhetoric and frontline culture. The drive to capture Berlin and conquer the would-be German conquerors appeared as a duty to carry out Stalin's final order, and the Red Army's misogynistic sexual culture reached its violent apex amidst the invasion of enemy lands and violation of foreign women.

CHAPTER 1  
SERVING AND WAITING: MEN'S CONFLICTED DUTIES ON THE EVE OF WAR, 1938-1941

Beginning in the summer of 1938, the Soviet Union's established systems of civil defense training, youth mobilization, and patriotic propaganda quickly lost their relevance as a result of dramatic changes in the international situation. A Japanese border attack in the Soviet Far East involved the Red Army in the first in a series of conflicts with foreign militaries. However, lackluster Red Army performance prompted little reform, save the scapegoating and execution of Marshall Vasilii Bliukher. The Winter War with Finland, lasting from November 1939 to March 1940, revealed Red Army weaknesses that summary executions alone could not remedy. The tactical failures and scale of losses the Red Army suffered against Finnish defenders convinced Soviet leaders, including Joseph Stalin, to reorient the military from ideological to operational priorities in command structure and training. Soviet men's physical and educational suitability to be soldiers during the Winter War emerged as a further problem, which preoccupied civilian and military leaders until the German invasion fourteen months later.

Alongside more technical efforts, the most long-term approach to improving the Red Army aimed at refining the draft pool of male youth. Soviet leaders sought to improve the means of strengthening bodies and inspiring patriotism before young men entered the military. Given Soviet efforts in these areas over the past decade, successful reform required an intensification of military training for civilians alongside a move away from voluntary programs. Beginning with mobilization policies during the Finnish War, young women's role in national defense plans appeared more and more as a supporting one, limited to nursing and auxiliary services. Policy and official rhetoric began to transition away from the decades-long effort to encourage women to participate in civil defense training and acquire weapon skills, which



complemented a heightened focus on male youth. However, the extra year of military service for conscripts and emphasis on men's patriotic duty conflicted with paternal duties in the family. While official rhetoric paid minor attention to this source of conflict, soldiers' families' quotidian problems of scarcity and hardship invoked an alternative set of loyalties to Red Army servicemen across generational lines.

This chapter argues that Soviet leaders militarized ideals of masculine subjectivity and collective affiliation during the period of border conflict. An emphasis on masculine duty constituted a revision of gender-neutral campaigns and policies to mobilize youth for national defense in the 1930s. In particular, the Komsomol sought to elevate military service to a central affiliation and a cultural rite of passage from boyhood into manhood among ambivalent young men. The Winter War prompted a corresponding shift in the mobilization and training of young women, which precluded combat roles and resembled the Red Army's fraternal culture during the Russian Civil War. Men's assertion of a contradictory, but no less Soviet, paternal duty to family soon emerged as the main point of contention to these changes. The Red Army and Komsomol reforms of the border conflict period established a pattern of variance between official and soldierly views of masculine subjectivity, in which disputed masculine values and affiliations existed alongside unanimity regarding subordinate femininities. These post-Winter War changes constituted a significant reaffirmation of military service and national defense as a masculine duty rooted in the Red Army's founding ideals.

### **Fighting to be a man**

The mass-conscript Red Army of 1941 had been refining itself for 23 years, and rested on a Tsarist foundation stretching several decades further into the past. From its creation as an institution, it pursued two goals in combat training beyond specific military skills: creating a

combat-ready body and a fighting ethic. Masculine values permeated both: strong, healthy, tough men's bodies appeared as aspirational images for youth. Motivational material stressed traditional ideas of courage and honor anchored in the defense of proletarian mothers, wives, and sisters as the foundation for victory in the Russian Civil War.<sup>1</sup> Victory and demobilization diminished the urgency of athletic and military training for youth, and when the Komsomol absorbed the Universal Military Training organization (Vsevoluch) in 1923, it did not preserve its focus on boys nearing draft age. While some Komsomol youth pursued recreation and entertainment, and others criticised NEP-era laxity and loss of wartime discipline, indifference to military training opportunities appeared as a common attitude among youth in the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> The formation of conscious and disciplined young men first served the expansion of a productive labor force. Physical culture in the 1920s emphasized health, discipline, and collective-mindedness without stressing military preparation as the primary purpose, although the latter aim became more important during the early 1930s.<sup>3</sup> The collectivist and disciplinary priorities of physical culture mirrored Red Army training that promoted ideological education and loyalty as much as applied military skills for much of the decade.

Soviet men heard speeches about military duty as citizenship by 1938, but the two founding elements of that duty, a masculine body and masculine ethic, barely registered as priorities. The public pronouncements of Soviet president Mikhail Kalinin reflected this generic appeal to citizenship, and presented military service as only one of many roles the Komsomol should promote: "education of the youth in the spirit of Leninism must include not only study but also practical activity. There are people of the most varied professions in the Komsomol:

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), 133.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 83.

<sup>3</sup> David Hoffman, "Bodies of Knowledge," in *Language and Revolution*, ed. Igal Halfin (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), 278-281.

scientists, writers, engineers, agronomists, workers and collective farmers, trade union, political and administrative workers, Red Army men, flyers, and so on.” Kalinin borrowed heavily from the rhetoric surrounding labor and the inspiration to heroic acts that Stalin’s leadership and communist consciousness provided: “heroism as a mass phenomenon is a product of our social system... but we also regard it as one of the elements of our country’s defense. I think it superfluous to point out that an army that is heroic, other things being equal, stands a better chance of winning.”<sup>4</sup> Such heroes in civilian life would succeed in national defense because they were special products of the Soviet system: “The new Socialist man is in the process of creation in our country,” and would possess five distinguishing qualities: love for one’s own people, honesty, courage, comradely team spirit, and love for work.<sup>5</sup> Comments such as these suited reflected the prevailing view of military service as something expected of youth, but without any urgency.

The discussion of such issues within the Red Army showed a similar focus on ideology over military readiness. On the occasion of the All-Union day of Physical Culture, an editorial in *Krasnaia Zvezda*, the newspaper of the Red Army, exhaustively described the military’s participation in this civilian summer activity. The effort to justify physical culture as important to soldiers, the editorial could only offer Commissar of Defense Kliment Voroshilov’s qualified explanation that “many elements make up the power and strength of the Red Army, in the ranks of which physical preparation does not occupy the last place” before noting that the Red Army “improves itself through the principles of Marxism-Leninism” in the same paragraph.<sup>6</sup> Later in

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<sup>4</sup> Article based on a speech delivered for the Komsomol’s 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. M.I. Kalinin, “The Glorious Path of the Komsomol,” in *On Communist Education*, M.I. Kalinin (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1950 ), 48-50.

<sup>5</sup> “Speech at a Conference of the Best Urban and Rural schoolteachers convened by the Editorial Board of the Newspaper *Uchitel’skaya Gazeta*” in *On Communist Education*, M.I. Kalinin (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1950 ), 76-78.

<sup>6</sup> “We worthily engage the All-Union day of physical culture,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 30 June 1939, 1.

1939, after war had begun in Europe, *Krasnaia Zvezda* explained how “to fulfill the tasks of the Komsomol, all Soviet youth, all young Soviet patriots, must unwaveringly work to raise their theoretical and ideological level to master Marxism-Leninism.”<sup>7</sup> Such rhetoric appears as grist for the mill in the official culture of the Soviet 1930s. This generic quality created expectations for Red Army soldiers, and the young men likely to join their ranks, that they would become a “collective combatant,” hardly distinguished from citizens still in the civilian realm. A soldier hero, like his counterpart in labor, might gain inspiration from Communist ideas to perform exceptional acts, but few examples of courage under fire were forthcoming, even after the recent Soviet victory over Japan at Khalkin Gol. Young men had little that was soldierly, and even less that was masculine, to aspire to in military service.

Ambivalence about soldiering began to change after forces of the Red Army, drawn only from the Leningrad Military District, invaded Finland on 30 November 1939. Soviet leaders expected a swift and relatively bloodless victory, much like the one the Red Army achieved in the occupation of eastern Poland two months earlier. The actual course of the war prompted considerable changes in the Red Army, the Komsomol, and the official rhetoric surrounding them both. By the end of December, the Red Army had completely failed to break Finnish defenses, and Finnish “*motti* tactics” led to the annihilation of whole Red Army battalions. Alongside a change in leadership and the transfer of massive reinforcements to Finland, the Central Committee of the Communist Party sent a secret request to the Komsomol to form five volunteer battalions on 11 January. The stipulated parameters consisted of political suitability, decisiveness, bravery, flawless physical health, shooting ability, skiing ability, and a minimum age of twenty.<sup>8</sup> Such demands marked a partial return to the Red Army’s founding masculine

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<sup>7</sup> “The patriotism of Soviet youth,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 6 September 1939, 3.

<sup>8</sup> RGASPI M-1 Opis 23 Delo 1439 Listy 9-11.

ideal in 1918. The Komsomol only considered male volunteers, and directed young women who volunteered to do their duty as nurses in Leningrad hospitals.<sup>9</sup> While limited in scale, the volunteer battalions established a new link between the Komsomol and the Red Army, and those units' composition reaffirmed the exclusivity of male military service despite Komsomol weapons training for men and women during the preceding decade.

National defense remained a male duty in mobilization policy, and received new emphasis as a masculine duty in official rhetoric. The profile of a hero pilot explained the source of his inspiration as not only Soviet, but paternal guidance: "Stalin is the father of pilots, the father of Soviet Aviation," which inspired "warm, son-like feelings toward the great leader and teacher." Martial heroism derived from Stalin's tutelage to produce a "son of the Soviet people, a son of Stalin" who proved his worth in battle.<sup>10</sup> Just as Stakhanovites had been model sons in peacetime labor, the soldier hero regained a masculine, more combat-focused persona as a model in the context of war.<sup>11</sup> The next day, a front page article in *Krasnaia Zvezda*, "Sons of the People," extended the theme of fathers and sons in a different direction. These sons represented the young Soviet generation, which had a duty to fight: "My father is a textile worker, explained Peter Fedorovich Kuznetsov, while I alone [in my family] work in the Red Army."<sup>12</sup> Young men like Kuznetsov understood their military service as a generational duty, just as the older generation fought for the revolution or labored to build socialism, all of which were gendered as masculine triumphs.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., List 125

<sup>10</sup> "National Hero," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 15 December 1939, 1.

<sup>11</sup> The choice of a pilot as an early hero during the Winter War appears to have been deliberate, given the established link between Stalin and peacetime aviation heroes. Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 120-125.

<sup>12</sup> "Sons of the people," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 16 December 1939, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Anne Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 100-102.

However, the actual course of the Winter War and pyrrhic Soviet victory in March raised a host of questions about the Red Army's flaws, including the manliness of its soldiers and potential recruits. A conference of officers and top party officials met for four days in April, and the urgent need for military reform resulted in a relatively open discussion, which Stalin himself seemingly encouraged.<sup>14</sup> While the deliberations often considered the effectiveness of weaponry, leadership, and battle tactics, leaders continually focused on soldiers' ability in battle, which was a central issue in every session.<sup>15</sup> The first priority of Red Army training at its founding, fashioning tough, masculine bodies out of the limited physical stock of recruits, returned as a central concern during the first session on the first day of the meeting. After a few tentative comments on the subject by other officers, Colonel Roslyi, a Hero of the Soviet Union, focused his speaking time on the lack of manly soldiers. He criticized his men's physical stature to begin: A serious thing came to light in the fighting: our men and commanders are awkward and slow. They are poor sportsmen and lose their breath quickly. I think we must pinpoint the question of giving more attention to drill training, bayonet practice, and physical exercise in the army."<sup>16</sup> In this short opening statement, Roslyi spread blame for early defeats among drill instructors, civilian athletics organizations, and officers setting poor examples.

The deficit of masculine bodies among young men to be drafted into the Red Army, and failure of Red Army training to improve on that condition went unchallenged. Colonel Roslyi believed more masculine soldiers demanded more masculine young men, since the problem extended beyond military performance: "I think the question of making physical culture an important school subject must be raised. If a boy cannot swim, if he is a poor runner, if he is

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<sup>14</sup> The conference was officially recorded with the exhausting title "Meeting of the Command Personnel and the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik) for Collecting Experience in the Military Operations against Finland," 14-17 April 1940, while Britain and Germany fought over Finland.

<sup>15</sup> The only exception being session 6, which still focused on combat performance, but that of commanders.

<sup>16</sup> E.N. Kulkov et al., *Stalin and the Soviet-Finnish War* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 15-16.

cannot last, if he is a poor athlete, no girl will love him [laughter]."<sup>17</sup> The sexual implications of his comments make clear that he linked the demands of soldiering with masculinity more broadly. Without mentioning the Komsomol or The Union of Societies of Assistance to Defense and Aviation-Chemical Construction of the USSR (OSOAVIAKhIM), his proposal for reform made clear that he sought to integrate the goal of physical prowess and a sense of duty into every boy's upbringing before they entered the military:

We must create a situation for every young man in our country to deem it his duty to be an athlete, a good skier, a good sportsman. We ought to have young men possessing these qualities. We can hardly achieve all of this solely in the army. Therefore, applied military arts should be taught at school so that our Red Army men will be capable of great endurance.<sup>18</sup>

Roslyi's proposal called for not only the militarization of at least part of the school curriculum, but the cultivation of soldierly qualities, both physical and ethical, in all Soviet boys. Later, Stalin himself pronounced judgment on the importance of training to battle performance: "I would like to touch on our troops' training in peacetime. To my mind, our men and commanders are poorly exercised in peacetime to endure the hard conditions of war." Stalin elaborated by drawing upon his experience inspecting units:

When we had field exercises, a man would get limp after working hard for three or four hours. Commanders and political instructors would surround him and ask him if he was tired. If the men had walked five or ten kilometers with gas masks on and got tired, the regimental commander would be picked to pieces and then next time he would not load them heavily, that is, would not prepare them for hard war conditions.<sup>19</sup>

Although his assessment obviously carried considerable authority on its own, Stalin reflected the opinion of assembled commanders that combat training, not political training, needed to become a greater priority in the molding of young men into soldiers.

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<sup>17</sup> If he cannot last: "если он невынослив." Ibid., 16.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 96-97.

The deliberations soon bore fruit in a vast series of military reforms, including dramatic changes to role of military service in young men's lives. Both official rhetoric and institutional mandates changed after the Winter War and command personnel meeting, with implications far beyond the more widely known Timoshenko Reforms within the Red Army.<sup>20</sup>

The primary structural change at the military level that affected Soviet youth was the extension of the term of active military service from two to three years in 1939, which made the 1940 draft cohort the first to finish school and consider pre-military training opportunities with three years of service in mind. However, the changes planned for Soviet young men before conscription sought to improve their capabilities long before they entered the extra year of military service.

Before reforms were drafted and implemented, President Kalinin began to speak on the importance of military service in a young man's development. With the restriction of military service exemptions for educational, religious, or family reasons in 1939, a greater percentage of young men graduating from secondary school faced conscription after the Winter War.<sup>21</sup> During a public discussion about heroism with the editorial board of *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* on the day the Winter War ended, Kalinin shared his thoughts on heroism and military service in the lives of young men. He presented his view of the proper process of maturation: "According to the law, young men finish school, then go to the army...it is better not to marry prior to military service. First, it is difficult to leave for three years...Second, once in the army, their outlook on life will be firmer. In every relationship he will become a stronger person. Then his choices will be more correct, and he can solidly build his life."<sup>22</sup> Military heroism, he explained, "is self-sacrifice, it is perhaps, the rejection of life and death in the name of life, in the name of the motherland. In

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<sup>20</sup> On the reforms and their impact, see Carl Van Dyke, "The Timoshenko Reforms, March-July 1940," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 9 no 1 (1996).

<sup>21</sup> Roger Reese, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), 12-14.

<sup>22</sup> RGASPI Fond 78 Opis 1 Delo 825 List 100.



this is the greatness of a real man. And it is necessary that from this perspective young people cultivate a love for military affairs, for heroism.”<sup>23</sup> The Soviet president thus presented military service as central to a young man’s development. It was not one career path of many, but a transformative period that provided bestowed manhood on the youth who entered, and the greatest of men likewise proved themselves through the military.

When speaking to young men directly, Kalinin emphasized the importance of military service to a greater degree than in his speeches before the Winter War. In April of 1940, he presented Moscow teenagers in the eighth, ninth, and tenth grades with a single path:

The time has now come when you must determine your future course, when you must finally decide what you are going to do. Many of you settle this question in too simple a fashion... To be serious in defining your future means to set the course for your life's journey, to fashion your character, your convictions, to find your calling. Each one of you must reason thus: I am a Soviet man, a citizen of a state that is surrounded by enemies, and for which I shall have to fight not less but more than past generations did.<sup>24</sup>

He provided little reason to doubt military service was part of their future, and the importance of studying hard: "the overwhelming majority of comrades will be able to enter higher schools after finishing their term of military service if they graduate from secondary school with a good showing," and then concluded: "From the bottom of my heart I wish this year's tenth graders to be good fighters in the ranks of our Red Army and also good students in our higher schools."<sup>25</sup> A serious duty to national defense began to replace the notion that heroism could manifest itself as an expression of communist zeal.

Just as Kalinin’s speeches reflected new priorities, structural reforms in 1940-41 sought to address failings in the Komsomol and voluntary organizations’ provision of defense training.

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<sup>23</sup> RGASPI Fond 78 Opis 1 Delo 825 List 16.

<sup>24</sup> Kalinin, *On Communist Education*, 116-117.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-117.

The Komsomol's own mid-year report showed that by the end of June, it had only reached 10.9% of its planned goal for defense training in 1940.<sup>26</sup> On 15 November 1940, the "Resolution on the organization of military-physical culture preparation of members of the Komsomol" made such training mandatory for all members.<sup>27</sup> The goals of this training included contributing to the "physical development of youth and preparing them for socialist labor and defense of the Soviet Union," and giving them "a basis of military knowledge and practical skills for [taking] decisive action in a combat situation."<sup>28</sup>

The first substantial product of the Komsomol's refocused, mandatory provision of defense training came in the form of an all union cross-country ski race on Red Army Day, 23 February 1941. The initial radio announcement was remarkably frank about the purpose of the event, to "showcase the state of Komsomol military physical training in every primary Komsomol organization," as part of a need to "expand work in skiing and other sports, so that in 1941, the vast majority of Komsomol members will achieve the state designation 'Ready for Labor and Defense.'"<sup>29</sup> Wishing to demonstrate its responsiveness to the post-Winter War reforms, the follow-up newspaper article prepared for *Pravda* and *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, emphasized two new themes: It promoted training to fashion a masculine body: "Young people of the Soviet Union are well aware that ski training, as well as any other types of physical culture and sports, are necessary to harden the body for service in the Red Army." Echoing Kalinin's comments, the article emphasized military service as a critical stage of life for young men: "For every young man in our country conscription into the Red Army is an event whose memory

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<sup>26</sup> RGASPI Fond M-1 Opis 23 Delo 1432 List 42.

<sup>27</sup> RGASPI Fond M-1 Opis 23 Del 1432 List 59.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., List 59.

<sup>29</sup> RGASPI Fond M-1 Opis 23 Delo 1479 Listy 11, 13.

remains for life.”<sup>30</sup> An approving summary of the year’s winter physical culture events in *Krasnaia Zvezda* praised the Komsomol race, and concluded that “races are an excellent approach to a man’s physical development. They strengthen the muscles.”<sup>31</sup> Although much more remained to be done, the Komsomol had shifted focus promoting the masculine ethic, and especially the masculine body required for military service.

However, in January 1941, Marshall Timoshenko’s report to the Communist Party Central Committee on youth training found that over the past year, the Komsomol had failed to instill into youth the idea that “To honorably do their duty in war, every Red Army soldier must not only be brave and courageous, but also resilient, tenacious, persistent, a great expert on military affairs, capable of fulfilling any task, no matter what the hardship. They [Komsomol officials and writers] have weakly presented these high moral qualities of soldiers.”<sup>32</sup> Confirming his impression was an OSOAVIAKhIM report in February of 1941, in which membership was high and growing, but the number of members actually completing training programs was quite low, less than 10%, in the cases listed.<sup>33</sup> Timoshenko’s reforms sought to provide boys and young men with the training to be heroes, to live up to an ideal as “Stalin’s soldier sons,” but this failed to materialize through the efforts of voluntary organizations.

A month later, Marshall Timoshenko opted to bypass the Komsomol and voluntary organizations entirely, and instead proposed the militarization of the Soviet school curriculum. He explained the urgent need for such a drastic step: “the present international situation, bringing war directly to the borders of the USSR, makes it imperative to strengthen and radically restructure the military-physical and special training of Soviet youth,” and he elaborated on the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., Listy 35, 37.

<sup>31</sup> “Mass physical culture in the Red Army,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 31 May 1941, 2.

<sup>32</sup> RGASPI Fond M-1 Opis 23 Delo 1483 List 124.

<sup>33</sup> RGASPI M-1 Opis 23 Delo 1478 Listy 46-47.

existence of German, British, and Japanese military training in their respective schools.<sup>34</sup> To solve the Red Army's problem, he proposed that "military and physical training should be mandatory in all schools" beginning with three hours per week in primary school and six hours of training mandated per week from the fifth grade through tenth grades.<sup>35</sup> Based on this proposal, Stalin approved a resolution of the Council of People's Commissars that aimed "to educate physically strong, hardy, and disciplined school-age youth, contributing basic knowledge and skills in drill, rifle, and medical training" for which "measurement of achievement in primary and pre-conscriptions military training will be made on the same basis as other subjects and recorded on the certificate or certificates students receive upon finishing school."<sup>36</sup> While the German invasion prevented its implementation, the plan to institute universal physical training for Soviet youth sought to normalize the transformation of civilian into soldierly bodies as a prerequisite for the completion of school and end of adolescence.

Ambivalence pervaded the reactions of the young men engaging with official rhetoric, performing military service, or facing conscription before June 1941. Many young men, even of politically suspect backgrounds, embraced the rationale for military service and the expectations surrounding it. A tenth grader in Vitebsk province, Viktor I. Karaban, remembered how near the end of the school year in 1941, "we, the boys, as we were completing our high school education, were afraid of being condemned by the enlistment commission [as physically unfit to serve]... to be condemned was shameful."<sup>37</sup> Another teenager, Dmitrii A. Krutskikh, whose father was

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<sup>34</sup> (это действительно требует усиления и коренной перестройки военно-физической и специальной подготовки советской молодежи.) RGASPI M-1 Opis 23 Delo 1477 List 6.

<sup>35</sup> The directives also stipulated training for students of various technical and vocational schools, as well as training for university students who had served in the Red Army. RGASPI M-1 Opis 23 Delo 1477 Listy 13-14.

<sup>36</sup> RGASPI M-1 Opis 23 Delo 1477 Listy 39-4.

<sup>37</sup> Recollections of Viktor Ivanovich Karaban, in *Red Army Infantrymen Remember the Great Patriotic War*, ed. Artem Drabkin (Bloomington: Authorhouse, 2009), 70.

repressed as a former Tsarist cavalry officer, remembered how at graduation in 1939, recruits “were all promised assignment in the Far East. It was so popular then! The Red Army had just gone through [Lake] Khasan and Khalkin-Gol victories!”<sup>38</sup> Mukhamet Shayakmetov, a draft-age Kazakh teen with relatives that fled to China during collectivization, embraced the idea of military service as a rite of passage into manhood: “During their time on active service, young men used to change beyond recognition, returning home older-looking, handsome and smart.”<sup>39</sup> Such young men reflected not only the general patriotism official rhetoric and education sought to instill, but also the new emphasis on manly bodies needed, and manly maturity provided, by the Red Army after 1939.

However, other young men proved unresponsive to the official motives for joining the Red Army, and instead focused on personal goals and interests. Some young men nourished romantic visions of military service from childhood, without any serious patriotic or ideological motivation, as Georgii Minin remembered “I was anxious to be a military man...It was the dream of any boy,” while a fleet-watching student in Leningrad, Mikhail Chernomordik, dreamed of “the romance of the sea, of a handsome uniform and girls’ eyes upon you; I ecstatically looked out on that splendor.”<sup>40</sup> While such childhood inspiration moved them to join, such motives reflected poorly on patriotic education or propaganda. Other boys failed to think of military service in their futures because career training loomed larger: “My local contemporaries didn’t know where to move after they graduated from high school. The matter wasn’t just to leave the village. Everyone wanted to acquire a profession.”<sup>41</sup> Corporal Dymbrepov, a Siberian

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<sup>38</sup> Recollections of Dmitrii Andreievich Krutskikh, in Drabkin (2009), 87.

<sup>39</sup> Mukhamet Shayakhmetov, *The Silent Steppe* (New York: Overlook/Rookery, 2007), 258.

<sup>40</sup> Recollections of Georgii Ivanovich Minin, in Drabkin (2009), 125. Recollections of Mikhail Aleksandrovich Chernomodik, in *Ia Dralsia s Pantse vaffe* [I fought against the Panzers], ed. Artem Drabkin (Moscow: Iauza, 2007), 268.

<sup>41</sup> Recollections of Nikolai Dmitrievich Nadel’ko, in Drabkin (2009), 152.

student who left university to serve in the Far East, wrote to his sweetheart (and future wife) on Red Army day to sound a dissonant note: “Ania, on this holiday, raise a glass and drink to our friendship, to our happy future....I hope that our dreams will be realized.”<sup>42</sup> Perspectives such as these suggest Soviet authorities had difficulty instilling a collective orientation or initial motivation to serve in youth, beyond the legal obligation to do so.

Among Red Army troops like Dymbrepov, military service was a tolerable obligation, but one in which soldiers failed to conform to a masculine culture or ideal of soldierly subjectivity in line with official motives. An artillerist fighting in Finland, Nikolai Shishkin, explained that frontline culture, including political officers, was bound by masculine comradeship without ideological content:

I think that commissars and political deputies worked well. They were men who didn't spare anything, didn't think of themselves. ...they never agitated about the 'party of Lenin and Stalin.' I, for example, never heard them yell 'for Stalin' in battle; there was a lot of cursing. ...Mornings before a battle there were one hundred men in the company, and in the evening, twenty, so there were full cans of vodka for all. You could drink as much as you liked. I didn't drink, but the guys said [by drinking it] the cold wouldn't 'get you.'<sup>43</sup>

Such an informal frontline community could organically produce comradeship and unit cohesion, bonding men around their endurance of shared hardship from the enemy and the elements, rather than the larger motives or causes of the conflict.

For other soldiers, the absence of official motives and guidance proved more harmful. Fighting at Khalkin Gol against Japanese veterans, Anton Iakimenko let felt down by his training and his officers' leadership: “we still had no battle experience. Morally, we were still not prepared to kill. After learning of the unsuccessful start of our battle, the commanders

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<sup>42</sup>Letter of Bato-Zhargal G. Dymbrepov to his girlfriend, 23 February 1941. RGASPI M-33 Opis 1 Delo 704 List 1.

<sup>43</sup>Recollections of Nikolai Konstantinovich Shishkin, in Drabkin (2007), 221-222. For an exploration of drinking and cursing as markers of masculine social culture before and after the Revolution, see Laura L. Phillips, *The Bolsheviks and the Bottle* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), 78-80.

reacted.”<sup>44</sup> Some officers seemed to pay as little attention as possible to explaining objectives to their troops, and instead focused on their own interests as men. The diary of Lieutenant Matveev, an infantry officer during the invasion of Poland, reveals that he consistently led his men in a manner that was manly, but not quite soldierly: “19.9, village of Beniumy – Happily saw attractive women. Village of Teretskovshchina, captured. ... 24.9, Grodno, a good city with a small river. The streets are filled with people, many attractive girls... 29.9, we visited the house of two Jewish women, and two more were visiting, so there were four in total, and three of us. The whole evening and night went excellently.”<sup>45</sup> While Matveev’s womanizing likely counted as exploits for some troops, especially among the comrades he brought along, he paid no mind to Red Army ideals of dutiful service or heroism. Units of the Red Army fighting in Finland, Mongolia, and Poland exhibited a masculine frontline culture, but struggled to consistently inculcate or reinforce a soldierly subjectivity in line with the “Stalin’s soldier son” ideal.

After limited success in border wars that began in 1938, Soviet leaders began to revive the priorities and rhetoric of the Red Army during its baptism by fire in the Russian Civil War. Such changes coincided with a shift away from the ideology-heavy approach of the 1920s and 1930s, and returned to the Red Army’s more balanced roots, which combined Russian military traditions with revolutionary goals. Soviet boys were the primary targets of such changes, as Red Army commanders suggested, in order to prepare them as soldiers before they joined the ranks. This focus on youth was not new, but reforms after the Winter War produced a new level of militarization in the Komsomol. Building on the established rhetoric of Stalin’s fatherly guidance of heroic sons in civilian pursuits, the militarization drive cast new expectations and programs for youth in strongly gendered terms. The lack of masculine bodies entering the army,

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<sup>44</sup> Recollections of Anton Dmitrievich Iakimenko, in *Ia Dralsia s Samuraiami* [I fought against the Samurais], ed. Artem Drabkin, (Moscow: Iauza, 2005), 47.

<sup>45</sup> Diary of Lt. Matveev. RGVA Fond 34980 Opis 14 Delo 84 Listy 133, 140, 143.

the transition from boyhood through conscription, and the need to train boys more than girls all received new attention after years of relying on ideological inspiration and focusing on political priorities. Young men approaching or entering the Red Army produced diverse responses to the new ideal. Some were drawn to its more practical priorities and the comradeship of military life, but many sought other paths to establishing themselves as men. The depiction and treatment of women only reinforced soldiers' and leaders' distinction among soldiers, men, and boys.

### **Combining women and war**

As a counterpart to the militarized norms for male youth, the Soviet government promoted a sometimes-contentious ideal of feminine citizenship. The expectations and opportunities for young women in revolutionary and national defense emerged early in the Russian Civil War. Alongside issues of militia or standing army as approaches to revolutionary defense, women's role in national defense occupied a central role in Bolshevik debates about citizenship in the new Soviet republic. Female Bolsheviks like Alexandra Kollontai aimed to raise women up to the status of equal citizens, and considered some degree of soldiering to be critical to women's claims. While most women who served in the Civil War were nurses or staff workers, an odd compromise emerged around women's role in national defense going forward: women could receive weapon and civil defense training in the Komsomol and Vsevoluch, but were not conscripted or allowed to volunteer for Red Army service. As a result, physical education for women stressed health as a prerequisite for optimal fertility: women would produce soldiers, rather than become them.<sup>46</sup>

Into the 1920s, hygiene campaigns promoted physical culture for women as a means of ensuring reproductive health, in contrast to the muscular bodies and leadership roles propaganda

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<sup>46</sup> Sanborn, 158.



promised similarly active men.<sup>47</sup> The Komsomol emerged as a source of profound problems for the Soviet project's promises of equality and opportunity for women. Young women found their male counterparts unwelcoming, activities and norms irrelevant to them, and no link between the Komsomol's agenda and the problems they faced in everyday life.<sup>48</sup> During the 1930s, a greater variety of feminine figures emerged within the confines of Stalinist culture, and civil defense training opportunities, still open to women, expanded considerably.<sup>49</sup> While policy allowed only young men to serve in the Red Army, the 1930s saw gender-neutral calls for youth to prepare for national defense through various institutions. Weapons training programs for civilian youth enabled motivated young women to envision themselves as future defenders of the Soviet Union and to develop military skills alongside male schoolmates and coworkers who faced the near-certainty of military service.<sup>50</sup> This seemingly contradictory set of policies in the 1930s appears as a compromise solution to the early debates between military purists and populists and feminists about the nature of national defense in a revolutionary country and women's roles therein.

In the military realm, official rhetoric emphasized exclusively passive or traditional women's roles to support the masculine ethic of national defense. Soviet women appeared in *Krasnaia Zvezda* as the relations of soldiers or officers, and without any role in military affairs or defense training. When articles including women made their rare appearances throughout the year, they presented distinctly masculine and feminine patriotic roles. While a son vowed "at the first call of the party and state I will go with our native Red Army to crush the enemy," a mother explained "My son serves on the border. He has captured many spies and saboteurs. I am proud

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<sup>47</sup> Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 192-193.

<sup>48</sup> Gorsuch, 100-104.

<sup>49</sup> Choi Chatterjee, *Celebrating Women* (Pittsburgh: University Press of Pittsburgh, 2002), 143-149.

<sup>50</sup> Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 40-41.

of him and joyful. I am competing with my son. He has become an excellent soldier, and I, his mother, am a Stakhanovite.”<sup>51</sup> Women appeared as patriotic and productive, but as mother-workers, distinctly feminine and civilian as good citizens. Later in 1939, the article “True daughter of the motherland” profiled the wife of a Soviet commander, who “diligently studies in nursing courses, takes an active role in social and mass political work,” including teaching children in the barracks kindergarten.<sup>52</sup> Articles such as these sent a clear message to soldiers: women, the mothers and wives of *Krasnaia Zvezda*’s readers, provided a complementary role as patriotic civilian workers and the traditionally feminine role of childcare providers.

The single exception to this depiction of women as soldiers’ relatives came in a brief article on Soviet pilot Marina M. Raskova. While Raskova played a pioneering role as a female member of the Soviet air force, the article explains her significance as someone who “was able to show the world the heroism of Soviet women. Courageous daughter of the great Soviet people, a fully educated, cultured woman, she completed a number of brilliant exploits, crowned by the heroic, fearless non-stop flight from Moscow to the Far East.” Despite the lavish praise heaped upon her, the article is about her nomination to a low-level regional *soviet* in Moscow, where she was “ready to fulfill with honor the orders of the people,” reinforcing her status as a civilian figure.<sup>53</sup> The article includes no mention of her military training, her work as an air force pilot instructor, or the fact that she received the military honor Hero of the Soviet Union for the non-stop flight. These omissions revised Raskova’s biography to conform to the binary of gendered defense that prevailed in soldier-specific propaganda, and reflected the contradictory ideals for Soviet youth that prevailed in the 1930s. Not only did *Krasnaia Zvezda* focus on civilian women

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<sup>51</sup> The article provided this brief excerpt of what was apparently a larger speech, prefacing the mother’s comment with “she talked about the happiness of free Soviet women.” “The pride of Soviet mothers,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 26 February 1939, p2.

<sup>52</sup> “True daughter of the motherland,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 23 December 1939, 3.

<sup>53</sup> “Fearless Soviet woman,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 12 November 1939, 1.

in unambiguously feminine family roles, but it also figuratively disarmed the foremost example of a military woman in the Soviet Union.<sup>54</sup>

The outbreak of war with Finland on 30 November 1939 proved different from the Red Army's battles against Japan earlier in the year due to its proximity to major cities, extended duration, and large personnel demands. The greater intensity of the conflict revealed the gendered reality of national defense obligations for Soviet youth that lay beneath relatively gender-neutral language about national duty throughout the 1930s. A December 4th report from the Leningrad city Komsomol to the Komsomol Central Committee described the response of young people to news of the outbreak of war with Finland:

Every day marked a great desire of the Komsomol and young people to go voluntarily to serve in the Red Army. From the youth of the city of Lenin we received hundreds of applications to District Commissioners to send them to the front, especially the girls, expressing a sincere desire to work as nurses at the front, as well as care for wounded patriots of our motherland in military hospitals.<sup>55</sup>

This report suggests that service in the Red Army meant something completely different for men and women, so that the young men's role as fighters needed no mention, while the women's role as nurses, at the front or in rear-area hospitals, was mentioned separately.

Propaganda content mirrored this secondary place for women's service, so that during the periods discussed above, only five articles appeared involving women, and officers' wives and nurses were the only roles presented. A speech by Komsomol Central Committee Secretary Mikhailov at an award ceremony emphasized that service as nurses fulfilled young women's duty citizens: "The Komsomol Central Committee warmly welcomes the brave patriots of the motherland, the wonderful female medical auxiliaries who in the moment of battle with honor

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<sup>54</sup> Such double effort fits the typical approach to marginalizing women in war according to sociologist Sharon Macdonald. Sharon Macdonald, "Drawing the lines – gender, peace, and war: An Introduction," in *Images of Women in Peace and War*, ed. Sharon Macdonald et al. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 6-7.

<sup>55</sup> RGASPI Fond M-1 Opis 23 Delo 1367 List 121.

and dignity fulfilled their duty to the socialist motherland."<sup>56</sup> While celebrating women's action as a praiseworthy fulfillment of duty, the speech made clear women's subordinate role, exhorting them to "be always the brave and courageous battle friends of soldiers and commanders of the Red Army and Navy."<sup>57</sup> While women had a duty to serve and could even receive medals for their service, the Komsomol gendered volunteers' military service into separate and differently valued roles.

After the Winter War ended, *Krasnaia Zvezda* did not even promote women's success as nurses as the primary female duty in wartime to accompany continued praise of male soldiers and their exploits against the Finns and Japanese. Articles about commanders' wives who became nurses appeared alongside articles about totally civilian commanders' wives. In both cases, the women exhibited motherly qualities and a soothing presence. The front page editorial in *Krasnaia Zvezda* on International Women's Day unambiguously stated: "To be an exemplary mother is the sacred obligation of a commander's wife."<sup>58</sup> Recounting episodes from the Winter War, a soldier recalled how he forgot what happened after he was badly wounded, "but the memory of her, of the nurse, I will carry with me for the rest of my life, like one carried in their heart the memory of their mother... when I called to my mother, she appeared as my mother."<sup>59</sup> The overlap between commanders' or soldiers' female relatives and nurses emphasized the limits of women's role in national defense, as the "Sister" article explained: "When husbands, brothers, sons went to the front, these women, by becoming nurses, felt like they were also in the ranks."<sup>60</sup> Women not only remained feminine while contributing to the limited war effort against Finland,

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<sup>56</sup> RGASPI Fond M-1 Opis 23 Delo 1439 List 154-155.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., List 154.

<sup>58</sup> "The fighting girlfriend of a commander," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 8 March 1941, 1.

<sup>59</sup> More literally, "became." She appeared as my mother "Она становилась матерью." "Sister," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 1 June 1941, 3.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

but their participation appeared as contingent on their husbands' or brothers' or sons' combat service, not a universal duty. A narrow focus on feminine support for the Red Army complemented the masculine ethic of combat motivation. While propaganda may not have defined soldiers' expectations regarding women's roles in wartime, such coverage of the Soviet Union's first declared war did nothing to challenge those expectations.

Mobilization and training policies after the Winter War promoted nursing in practical terms. In November 1940, Komsomol and sport committees reported to the Red Army Political Administration (PUR) on new training guidelines that reflected military reform priorities to lower ages of eligibility for the Ready for Labor and Defense (GTO) norm system, "to allow 1st level youth and girls under 16 years old to pass the norms of GTO." A subsequent provision sought "to replace the requirements of the training of existing norms system (male) for the program of the badge "Voroshilov Shot" with norms of rifle training taken in the KOP [course of weapons training] of the Red Army for small-caliber rifles."<sup>61</sup> Locally, this quickly impacted training policies, such as mandatory defense training for working youth preparing for the Ready for Labor and Defense (GTO) 1st level badge. In January, a Ukrainian metal pipe factory's Komsomol organized young workers youth for training: "they were formed into 14 groups: 9 rifle, containing 108 male *Komsomoltsy*, two groups of nurses, into which 70 girls have entered," and three mixed-gender signal groups, so that "in military training we involved 393 male *Komsomoltsy* and female *Komsomolki*."<sup>62</sup> After describing examples of men and women participating in the signal training, the report emphasized that "In our rifle groups there are only

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<sup>61</sup> Youth and girls: "юношей и девушек" and (male): "(мужчин)." RGASPI Fond M-1 Opis 23 Delo 1434 List 100.

<sup>62</sup> 393 male Komsomols and female Komsomols "393 комсомольцев и комсомолок." RGASPI Fond M-1 Opis 23 Delo 1482 List 100-101.

men training."<sup>63</sup> Komsomol policy had thus shifted to segregate girls' training opportunities and limit them compared to the more gender-neutral approach of the 1930s.

Red Army commanders pressured the Komsomol to make such changes and explained their reasoning openly. According to Major General Tarasov, the Red Army believed that:

The introduction of mandatory military-physical training of male *Komsomoltsy* constituted a completely essential measure. They will provide multi-purpose mobilized readiness not only of the millions of reserves mobilized from the Komsomol, but will also activate and improve the military-physical training of the whole mass of the country's draft-eligible population.<sup>64</sup>

He elaborated a separate aim, to have "girl-*Komsomolki*" trained in non-combatant military specialties, in order to have them replace men who would then go fight in a crisis situation.<sup>65</sup>

Such unequivocal reform plans aimed to codify the practices of the Komsomol's mobilization for the Winter War. Only the feminine role of nurse remained open to women, or rather, it was the option open to them, as they bore no obligation to national defense. This conception of national defense as a male duty became law in May 1941, when Stalin and Molotov approved the education reforms that brought training into Soviet schools. This new policy stipulated that while male and female students would receive the same basic training, male students would receive military pre-draft training while female students' training would be "with the military-nursing niche."<sup>66</sup> The duty of youth to defend their motherland, in both rhetoric and policy, grew increasingly masculine during the border war period, so that women's exercise of patriotism was ideally done in a feminine way, as nurses.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., List 102.

<sup>64</sup> RGASPI Fond M-1 Opis 23 Delo 1432 List 67.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., List 68.

<sup>66</sup> The military-nursing niche "с военно-санитарным углом." RGASPI Fond M-1 Opis 23 Delo 1477 Listy 40-41.

The Red Army rank and file heaped praise on women that scarcely differed from that of official rhetoric. In fact, hospitalized troops' letters of praise to military hospitals during the Winter War provided the basis for nurses to receive commendations. One January testimonial reported: "As if she were my own mother, she gave all her strength and all her skill into this work."<sup>67</sup> A wounded soldier evacuated to Novgorod praised a woman doctor, Avgustina M. Lysenko but without reference to her professional status: "Like a mother, she attentively cares for, visits, and serves the wounded, checking to see if they are relaxed, have an appetite, how they rested, and attentively monitors cleanliness."<sup>68</sup> Soldiers could thus value women's motherly qualities more than their medical training, and ascribe implausible duties to them to suit the purpose. Some troops actively distinguished between their nurses' qualities and roles and their own as soldiers: "Your love and caring has produced in us boundless hatred for the enemy. Your love has given rise in our hearts to boundless devotion to our beloved homeland... we will fight to the last breath and achieve total victory over the enemy."<sup>69</sup> The letter sets up a clear contrast between women's role to love and provide care, and men's to hate and fight, which essentially parallels the Red Army and Komsomol division of citizens' duties. Red Army fighters, especially during the Winter War, not only accepted women's exclusion from combat, but also help up feminine and motherly qualities as the measure of women's success in the war effort.

Young Soviet women had good reason to expect and learn combat skills in preparation for national defense growing up in the 1930s, but Red Army and Communist Party leaders denied them that opportunity in the Winter War. Not expecting a war in June 1941, they also made plans to limit those skill training opportunities and began changing official rhetoric about combat roles in wartime. Women's horizons appeared to be shrinking as a complement to the

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<sup>67</sup> RGASPI Fond M-1 Opis 23 Delo 1439 List 140.

<sup>68</sup> RGVA 34980 Opis 5 Delo 68 List 12.

<sup>69</sup> RGASPI Fond M-1 Opis 23 Delo 1439 List 136.

revival of old Red Army goals of developing a masculine ethic and masculine body among recruits. Young men had been made to expect women's care and help as nurses, and policy changes provided fewer and fewer alternatives for young women interested in military skills training. While the various changes surrounding the Timoshenko reforms had scarcely made an impact by June of 1941, they represented a clear step toward realizing an uncomplicated wartime feminine ideal already apparent in official rhetoric about motherly nurses and officers' wives.

### **Reconciling men's duties**

Soviet men's own commitment to serve often came second to their personal loyalties as family men. Demands for military service exemptions to suit family needs appeared alongside mandatory conscription into the Red Army during the Russia Civil War, and posed a serious challenge to Red Army officials.<sup>70</sup> However, such concerns ran counter to revolutionary priorities and the fratriarchal culture of struggle during the Civil War and 1920s.<sup>71</sup> Replacing family with collective loyalty became a goal in the civilian realm and problem for Soviet leaders who sought to normalize the demands of military service and promotion of a masculine subjectivity that valued collective affiliation. By the mid-1930s, the family regained prominence in official culture, having become a helpmate for the state and symbol of loyalty. However, the family held value only when it served the state, and should be abandoned if it failed to do so, in favor of the national family based on political ties, not blood.<sup>72</sup>

Despite the fluctuations in Soviet views on the family as an institution, a notion of Soviet paternal duty developed by the late 1930s, which appeared in didactic cultural forms as well as legal requirements. In the 1920s, Soviet men had a general obligation to provide an example of

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<sup>70</sup> Sanborn, 106.

<sup>71</sup> Eliot Borenstein, *Men without Women*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 3-5.

<sup>72</sup> On the family's place in mid-1930s culture, see Clark, 114-15. On the need for vigilance within the family, and implications of failure, see Igal Halfin, "Intimacy in an Ideological Key: The Communist Case of the 1920s and 1930s" in *Language and Revolution: Making Modern Political Identities*, ed. Igal Halfin (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), 65.



socialist behavior, since Soviet propaganda assumed they were more politically conscious than women. In the 1930s, that duty received more explicit formulation, as an article explained that “A poor husband and father cannot be a good citizen.”<sup>73</sup> Propaganda presented various morality tales and exhortations on proper behavior at home, such as an article that condemned fathers who were “drinking up the milk money” as a reason to foreswear alcohol.<sup>74</sup> The “Red Don Juan” exemplified a key negative behavior, serial marriage and divorce, which often coincided with pregnancy. Not only propaganda, but reforms to marriage, paternity, and child support laws encouraged men to be monogamous, as part of a larger campaign to ensure the stability of heterosexual families and maximize procreation.<sup>75</sup> The sum of paternal duty thus demanded that Soviet men instill socialist values in children, provide for material needs, and display strong loyalty to the family unit.

Soldiering may not have conflicted with paternal duty for bachelors conscripted in their late teens, but the call up of reservists and end to exemptions brought husbands and fathers into the Red Army in 1939 and 1940. Having pilloried men who abandoned their families in propaganda, Soviet leaders provided only the slightest relief to military families facing forced separation.<sup>76</sup> While military reform protocols after the Winter War included various measures related to morale, efforts to minimize the hardship of isolation consisted only of a review of the field postal system, which had performed miserably during the Winter War.<sup>77</sup> The most substantial policy change came from the Council of Peoples' Commissars, when it passed two

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<sup>73</sup> David Hoffman, *Stalinist Values* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 91, 105.

<sup>74</sup> Starks, 118-119.

<sup>75</sup> Hoffman (2003), 43-45.

<sup>76</sup> Stories of male irresponsibility accompanied the larger pro-natalist campaigns of the 1930s, but were most common in women's periodicals. They occasionally appeared in the national newspaper *Izvestiia*. Choi Chaterjee, *Celebrating Women* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 154-55.

<sup>77</sup> The report emphasized both the importance of receiving letters to soldiers' morale and the slowness of mail delivery both to and from the front. RGVA Fond 34980 Opis 3 Delo 99 List 87.

resolutions on soldiers' pensions.<sup>78</sup> The first dealt with pensions for the families of soldiers killed in action, standardizing amounts based on rank and medals awarded. The second provided for those wounded in battle or otherwise injured in service, and promised to transfer their pensions to their families in the event of their deaths.<sup>79</sup> The new policies denied any level of family emergency that could affect the status of soldiers spending three years “fulfilling their sacred warrior’s obligation in the ranks of the Red Army.”<sup>80</sup> Pensions rewarded only completed service, disabling wounds, or death, which reinforced the message of official rhetoric that service to the national collective superseded personal interests.

Despite minimal acknowledgement in official rhetoric, Red Army troops, and even young men of draft age, felt the contradiction between their obligations to state and family. Expressions of concern could possess a positive or negative tone. Some servicemen sought to aid their families from afar by sending money whenever possible, like infantryman Nikolai Pimanenok, who sent his family 650 rubles from his occupation post in Latvia, and instructed them that “every time you receive money quickly report it me. That's the main thing that I wanted to write to you.”<sup>81</sup> In contrast to positive efforts to provide, some troops presented their concern as a fear of what would happen in their absence. An infantryman from Novgorod wrote his wife to express concern and pose various questions about her circumstances: “Ira, I am very worried about [our son] Vania because you wrote that you cannot care for him always and he caught a cold. ... how much are you getting [paid] from the factory?”<sup>82</sup> Concern for family could manifest itself not only in letters home, but also in frontline behavior. During the battle against

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<sup>78</sup> The Soviet state’s care for military servicemen and their families,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 18 July 1940, 1.

<sup>79</sup> RGASPI Fond 82 Opis 2 Delo 801 List 98.

<sup>80</sup> The Soviet state’s care for military servicemen and their families,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 18 July 1940, 1.

<sup>81</sup> Letter of Nikolai N. Pimanenok to his wife, 17 July 1940. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 611 List 5.

<sup>82</sup> Letter of Alexsei I Ivanov to his wife, 12 November 1939. RGASPI M-33 Opis 1 Delo 18 List 1.

the Japanese at Khalkin-Gol, a soldier awoke to hear his comrade, Netrebko, muttering: “I’m not going into battle anymore.” When asked to clarify, he repeated: “I’m not going, I said, I’m not going. I could die here ...at home I have a mother, wife, and son.”<sup>83</sup> Netrebko failed his comrades, but expressed concerns about neglecting his responsibilities to loved ones that they likely shared. While their duty as soldiers removed such men from their homes, it did not diminish their sense of duty to their families, whether they were caring for wives and children or parents and siblings.

Soldiers did more to express the primacy of their loyalty to family than write letters home. In the first months of 1941, after the Timoshenko and related reforms had begun, but before the German invasion of 22 June, Red Army troops sent thousands of petitions to the Soviet government. Those six months provide an invaluable period in which to access soldiers' responses to military service and the “collective combatant” soldierly masculinity presented to them in propaganda and political work. This value lies in the fact that soldiers did not expect immediate and total war, which would certainly change their perspective, and so their opinions and priorities reflected the tense peacetime environment in which the official rhetoric promoted the “collective combatant.” I argue that the primary response to military service evident in soldiers' letters was not the blind enthusiasm of some *Komsomoltsy* or the outright opposition attributed to later deserters, but adherence to a “provider masculinity,” which appeared in letters to both personal and state recipients.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Netrebko, a Communist Party member, faced his comrades in a squadron party meeting, and was removed from his unit to face a military tribunal. He was not seen again by his comrades. Recollections of Petr Egorov, in *Ia dralsia s samuraiami* [I fought the samurai], ed. Artem Drabkin (Moscow: Iauza, 2005), 92.

<sup>84</sup> On the possible political views of deserters, see Mark von Hagen “Soviet Soldiers and Officers on the Eve of the German Invasion” in *The People's War*, ed. Robert Thurston et al. (Urbana, 2000), 237-238.

In as large a group of men as the Red Army, a variety of secondary perspectives naturally existed.<sup>85</sup> These perspectives were particularly prevalent among draft-age young men lacking familial commitments and driven by a personal motivation to serve. Such young men viewed the prospect of military service with naive visions of glory, such as Vladlen Krasil'nikov, who addressed his letter "Dear Grandfather Kalinin," and requested early admission to the Leningrad naval school at age 16 to fulfill his childhood dream of defending the motherland.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, A. Chiniaev asked his "grandfather" [Kalinin] for help to get into pilot school, from which he had been rejected due to extremely poor vision, because he had wished to be a pilot since childhood.<sup>87</sup> Belief in their military duty motivated others, such as Ukrainian soldier Luk'ian Gannits'kii, who wrote to his mother and had to report his promotion to sergeant without greeting her,<sup>88</sup> or Anatolii Avdeev, who wrote Kalinin to request reinstatement into the army after being demobilized because "in 1937 [his commander] was arrested as an enemy of the people."<sup>89</sup> Such petitions were few in number and never written by married men or those who had received educational or other exemptions from conscription.

Having entered the ranks, Red Army soldiers were obviously willing to serve, but few accepted the idea that their first duty as men was to their country, rather than their families. When such soldiers could not provide for their families through remittances, they sought exemptions from service premised solely on familial grounds. Vasilii Balantsev explained that his wife had become ill, and as a result he required an exemption to care for her and his 7 young children, aged 2 through 11, who were "left without a piece of bread."<sup>90</sup> Another soldier,

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<sup>85</sup> In early 1941, the Red Army consisted of approximately three million men. Reese, 195-196.

<sup>86</sup> GARF Fond 7523 Opis 26 Delo 259 List 76.

<sup>87</sup> GARF Fond 7523 Opis 26 Delo 293 List 309.

<sup>88</sup> Letter of Luk'ian Ganitskii to his mother, 14 March 1941. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1411/3 List 1.

<sup>89</sup> GARF Fond 7523 Opis 26 Delo 30 List 13.

<sup>90</sup> GARF Fond 7523 Opis 26 Delo 30 List 291.

Nadzhumuddin Agagulov explained that while “serving in the ranks of the Red Army is very pleasant and I enjoy it,” the death of both his uncle and mother in October required him to leave the army to take care of the remaining ten members of his family. Without a working-age man among them, he requested “permission to go home for the service of [my] family.”<sup>91</sup> Such letters reflect soldiers' priorities and belief that family duty was a legitimate basis for exemption. Moreover, the variety of family situations that young men felt compelled to provide for demonstrates the pervasiveness of soldiers' belief in their duty as providers. Ivan Bezdenezhdnyi wrote to Kalinin requesting six months of leave, in order to care for his two young sisters because their mother had just died.<sup>92</sup> Most of these men did not enter the army as fathers, yet felt compelled as men to act as providers for their families first, and soldiers second.

Soldiers' belief that their familial duty took precedence was especially strong in cases where they could make a claim to have done enough for national defense, even if they had not fulfilled a their three year draft term. Both Pavel Andreev and Soltan-Murant Akabaev believed that two years of military service was a sufficient fulfillment of duty given that their families were suffering because their only working age men were at the front. Akabaev assessed his two years of service simply: “I have repaid my debt to the motherland.”<sup>93</sup> Likewise, soldiers whose families had already sent men to the Red Army seemed to consider their duty fulfilled by proxy, and therefore deserved exemption to fulfill the more basic duty of provider. Jr. Sgt. Vasilii Gromov began his request with the story of his two brothers' deaths in the Finnish War, the second volunteering to avenge the death of the first, and the recent death of his father, a twice-wounded civil war veteran. The loss of all other men in his family entitled him, Vasilii believed,

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<sup>91</sup> “Мне разрешить пойти домой для обслуживания семей.” GARF Fond 7523 Opis 26 Delo 30 List 33.

<sup>92</sup> GARF Fond 7523 Opis 26 Delo 30 List 360.

<sup>93</sup> Andreev GARF Fond 7523 Opis 26 Delo 30 Listy 130-131; Akabaev: “Свой долг родине я отдал.” GARF Fond 7523 Opis 26 Delo 30 Listy 52-53.

to special leave to ensure "that my mother is prepared for the winter."<sup>94</sup> Soldiers' requests often contrasted men's service with women's vulnerability, possibly challenging the general notion, if not the formal provisions, of official rhetoric about state care for soldiers' families.

Many soldiers, possibly as a strategy to avoid being ignored as cowards or shirkers, requested alternatives to service exemption, as long as their continued service allowed their families to be provided for. Azeri soldier Razman Bakhitev's request is indicative of such bargaining, as he requested either release from service or material support for his orphaned siblings.<sup>95</sup> Some soldiers, like K. Akumakh and Aleksandr Afanas'ev sought to negotiate a deal, in order to gain an exemption in exchange for future wartime service, perhaps expecting another mobilization on the scale of Finland. With elderly mothers and young siblings struggling to earn enough to eat, both seemed to consider their duty to be national defense in war, but in peacetime his family's care. Hinting at future war, Afanas'ev promised: "My duty to the motherland I can repay at any minute if the motherland requires it," while Akumakh stated plainly: in the event of war, I am certain, that I will fulfill my duty with honor."<sup>96</sup> Using these varied strategies, Red Army soldiers sought to fulfill their duty to their families above all, leaving no doubt that they accepted the legitimacy of their military service obligations, and appear to have been more successful than those requesting unqualified release from the military. For these soldiers, like others less shrewd in their approach, military duty was a legitimate as long as their families' basic needs were assured.

This "provider masculinity" constituted an alternative to the "collective combatant" soldierly masculinity, because such men were unwilling to accept national duty above family duty, holding the latter as their foremost motivation. As a result, thousands of letters to Soviet

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<sup>94</sup> "Что мать моя устроеная на зиму." GARF Fond 7523 Opis 26 Delo 259 List 30.

<sup>95</sup> GARF Fond 7523 Opis 26 Delo 30 List 335.

<sup>96</sup> Afansaev GARF Fond 7523 Opis 26 Delo 30 List 222; Akumakh GARF Fond 7523 Opis 26 Delo 30 List 42.

authorities requested service exemptions to deal with family problems, and thus showcased soldiers' weighting of the relative importance of competing masculine duties, and also the entitlements their service merited. Their letters make clear that peacetime service was a secondary duty, and when familial hardship or distress arose, their duty as providers, as the only men in their families, overrode military service, and they expected the government to accommodate them accordingly. This "provider masculinity" motivated not only fathers and husbands, but men in a variety of family situations, including young bachelors, and was thus not simply a "fatherly masculinity." Likewise, a specific obligation to provide for their loved ones' material well-being appeared as a universal motivation, as did the unspoken notion that soldiers, as the leading men of their family, were chiefly responsible for the remedy, in lieu of state care. Taken together, soldiers' views as expressed in letters present military service as a legitimate but secondary duty in which men participated as a sacrifice to be honored and rewarded, rather than a sacred task to be done enthusiastically.

## **Conclusion**

Soviet reforms after the end of the Winter War reveal a high degree of uncertainty concerning how young men and women would be trained and mobilized in preparation for a future war, as well as more obvious problems of military leadership, tactics, and equipment. Boys and young men became the central focus of reforms to youth preparedness for military training and as well as new expectations regarding the role of military service in their lives and in relation to their very status as men. Girls and young women simultaneously lost training opportunities and encouragement to prepare for national defense roles beyond the nursing option afforded to women volunteers during the winter war. An assertion of paternal duty as a counter

to military duty showed men's expression of Soviet, but non-conformist subjectivities in the military context.

Studies of the Timoshenko Reforms usually focus on their brief duration and limited depth, or discount them as lacking a serious grasp on the Red Army's deficiencies and their remedy.<sup>97</sup> The extension of reform into civil defense organizations, the Komsomol, and secondary schools, all supported by new propaganda themes, reveals that Soviet leaders, Timoshenko foremost among them, planned more than just superficial tinkering in response to the Red Army's poor showing against the Finns. The reforms directed at civilian military preparation are significant because they marked a break from voluntary organizations in favor of compulsory society-wide changes to youth culture and education. The corresponding downgrade of women's training marks an important, if short-lived, shift in the gendering of official patriotism and national defense roles. While Soviet teenage girls and young women had accessed military training and imagined themselves as defenders in a future war, they were also more likely to face parents' and peers' discouragement and official images of productive civilian-only women for whom military training was totally irrelevant.<sup>98</sup> The narrow mobilization of women volunteers in the Winter War and plans to discontinue women's future civil defense training help explain why Soviet women were not able to immediately volunteer for the front when war returned in June 1941.

The revival of a masculine ethic of national defense demonstrates the enduring significance of the Red Army's founding ideas, which included gendered notions of citizenship and physiological differences in military service capabilities. These ideas reappeared in the

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<sup>97</sup> For the more optimistic perspective, see Carl Van Dyke, "The Timoshenko Reforms: March-July 1940," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 9 No. 1 (March 1996), 69-96. Less charitable are Reese, 172-175, and Earl F. Ziemke, *The Red Army, 1918-1941* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 238-240.

<sup>98</sup> On women's opportunities and aspirations, see Krylova, 49-83. On discouragement to join the Komsomol, see Gorsuch, 99-104. On the wholly civilian variant of the New Soviet Woman, see Chatterjee, 159-161.



Stalinist context of the Border War Period, but lacked the resonance they once had. The nostalgia for the masculine front community and simplicity of fraternal revolutionary solidarity that figured prominently in the 1920s had not persisted into the Soviet Union's third decade.<sup>99</sup> Soviet men expressed a competing masculine duty to family rooted in Stalinist values from the past decade the primary basis of their petitions against military service. This alternative duty represented a choice between conflicted official identities that clearly inverted the official and legal hierarchy of male priorities. Soldiers' willingness to not only consider but challenge the contradictions in official scripts reveals a significant limit to official efforts to reshape men's views of military duty and their affiliations more generally.<sup>100</sup> Soldiers' obligation to family extended beyond the paternal, and thus included young men who had begun to receive more encouragement to see the military as their gateway to manhood. Men's petitions, and their grounding in families' material hardship, represent a significant reinterpretation of official scripts and their potential to undermine official priorities without expressing overt opposition.

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<sup>99</sup> Borenstein, 23-24.

<sup>100</sup> More devoted citizens reconciled such contradictions by focusing on the long-term progress of the Revolution. Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 360-361.

CHAPTER 2  
SACRIFICING AND SURVIVING: DIVERGENT REACTIONS TO THE INVASION CRISIS OF 1941

When Germany and its allies began their surprise attack on 22 June, 1941, the Soviet government and its citizens suddenly found themselves fighting a total war unlike that which had been predicted and planned for over the past three years. Virtually all of Soviet society faced some type of mobilization for the war effort, which moved people into the military or militarized their civilian environment. However, the Red Army mobilized its forces and sought to motivate them using overtly masculine service expectations. After dismissing the prewar narrative of “defeating the enemy on enemy soil” as fantasy in light of German success, Soviet servicemen and conscripts faced separation from their families in a radically altered and more dangerous context.<sup>1</sup> Official rhetoric immediately cast the war effort as a collective endeavor, but the ostensibly unified struggle to drive out the enemy quickly divided along lines of gender regarding how and why individual citizens contributed to victory. Soviet men expressed masculine subjectivities that revealed difficulty adapting to the wartime context despite the experience of peacetime service and a steady stream of ideal heroes to emulate.

Both frontline propaganda and soldiers used gendered language to discuss attributes, roles, and power in the early Soviet war effort. While many of these issues carried over from prewar debates and ambiguities in Soviet culture and military service policies, the German invasion created new demands on Soviet citizens and soldiers that invited interpretation as distinctly gendered phenomena. Among the former, the division of front and rear as respectively masculine and feminine carried on from depictions of the Russian Civil War and the Winter War.

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<sup>1</sup> Young men repeatedly evoked these lines to describe their expectations before or immediately after the outbreak of war, which quickly faded once victories failed to appear in the press. For example, see the recollections of Sergei Andreevich Otroshchenkov, in *Tankisti “My pogibali, sgorali”* [Tankers “We killed, burned”], ed. Artem Drabkin, (Moscow: Iauza, 2012), 93.

The more recent concern of family as an alternative source of masculine responsibility also persisted. In early July, a new ideal of self-sacrifice for the cause of national defense emerged in response to the German invasion. Soldier-specific propaganda sought to create virtue out of necessity among Red Army units fighting a better-led enemy with the strategic initiative, and presented contrasting reports of German invaders killing Soviet women and girls as inspiring tragedies. In the first days of the war, sacrifice and survival emerged as interconnected subjects of official and soldierly reactions to the war. They persisted until the defeat of German forces outside Moscow in December stabilized the strategic situation and inspired optimism for rapid Soviet victory.

This chapter argues that the outbreak of war did not alter the incongruity between official and popular expectations of defense duty and soldierly heroism. In a country as focused on a specific vision of war as the Soviet Union had been in the three years leading up to the invasion, adapting propaganda and policy to the reality of total war took time, despite the prompt promotion of a new ideal of sacrificial heroism. Citizen soldiers and conscripts who had struggled with the demands of peacetime military service likewise adapted their sense of self only gradually amidst frontline hardships and combat. A comparison of official and soldierly responses to the invasion shows that servicemen and Soviet officials agreed on men's duty to fight, but retained separate, yet tensely interrelated notions of the importance of individual and collective affiliations and priorities. The ideal soldier presented in official rhetoric and his real counterparts contemplated the issue of sacrifice and death in combat, but espoused different norms of why and how they fought. Above all, the war created new expectations for Soviet men and women to not only contribute to the collective endeavor of national defense, but to kill and die for it, and distinguished the manner and meaning of those deaths based on gender.

### **Separating home and front**

As mobilization got underway, the distinction between front and rear grew in importance in official rhetoric and among the underprepared young men entering the expanding ranks of the Red Army. Although massive in scale, the mobilization effort employed the same categories as that of the Winter War, in which patriotic women found themselves directed to nursing and medical roles, while men of draft age began combat training. Cities and towns quickly emptied of young men, and official rhetoric reinforced the idea of the front as where men belonged. Soldier specific propaganda emphasized familiar ideas such as Stalin's leadership over the sons of the motherland and the duty of those men to defend Soviet women. Young men and boys had difficulty making the transition to their new role as soldier at war. Even among those comfortable in their uniforms during mundane training and garrison duty, the unfamiliar frontline space and experience of combat challenged troops' views of themselves.

The Soviet government pursued nearly universal mobilization for the war effort, but exceptions crept in from the very beginning. The resolution of the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) on 2 July mandated "that citizens of both sexes – women aged 18 to 50 and men aged 16 to 60 are required to participate in self-defense groups of the Moscow anti-aircraft defenses," but exempted expectant mothers and women with children under age 8.<sup>2</sup> The minor difference between men's and women's obligations only lasted until August, when the Sovnarkom ordered the "increase of military and physical training for members of the senior grades of high school," adding 2-3 hours of training at the expense of boys' study of literature, history, and sciences.<sup>3</sup> It also ordered medical training for female students. Then in September,

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<sup>2</sup> *KPSS o Vooryzhennikh Silax Sovetskogo Soiuz*a (Moscow: Partizdat, 1981), 300-301.

<sup>3</sup> *KPSS o Vooryzhennikh Silax Sovetskogo Soiuz*a, 308-09.

the State Defense Committee, chaired by Stalin, ordered “mandatory military training for male citizens of the USSR aged 16-50,” but stipulated that “in the first rank for military training are the draft [cohort] years of 1923 and 1924.”<sup>4</sup> These policies conformed to the pre-invasion changes in youth military training, and reflected the Red Army’s established character as an all-male combat force. One exception to this approach appeared in 1941, when Stalin approved the creation of three all-female air regiments during the crisis of October 1941, although the units would not see combat until 1942.<sup>5</sup>

At the front, official rhetoric presented the Red Army’s objectives in the terms of the masculine ethic of the Russian Civil War combined with Stalinist values of 1930s. On 1 July, *Krasnaia Zvezda* synthesized these two elements in an article about the danger facing Soviet citizens, titled “Our thoughts are with you, warrior of the Red Army.” On the one hand, the article warned that “presently the fascists’ cannons are shooting women and children, presently millions of people languish in fascist concentration camps.” On the other, it promised the fascists’ destruction, since “Leading us is Stalin, our leader, our father, the greatest genius in the world.”<sup>6</sup> The duty to defend women and children, and Stalin’s personal leadership of the figurative national family suggested that there could be no greater priority. Days later, other articles elaborated on the importance of duty to the nation over the impact on individual families. A letter from parents to their six sons at the front reassured them, and by extension, all soldiers who left parents behind: “Don’t worry about us oldsters. We are working in our home *kolkhoz*, like all collective farmers, and despite the departure of our best, the collective farmers on the

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<sup>4</sup> Those men in older age cohorts and performing unskilled labor were to serve in military reserves. *KPSS o Vooryzhennikh Silakh Sovetskogo Soiuz*, 311-312.

<sup>5</sup> Panic struck Moscow as the government opted to relocate to Kuibyshev, hundreds of kilometers to the east. Reina Pennington, “Do Not speak of the Services You Rendered: Women Veterans of Aviation in the Soviet Union” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* vol. 9 no. 1 (1996): 120.

<sup>6</sup> “Our thoughts are with you, warriors of the Red Army,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 1 July 1941, 3.

frontline in the patriotic war, in defense of the motherland, we will handle our farming.”<sup>7</sup> These articles were typical of a propaganda narrative that promoted military duty as a masculine need to defend women, children, and the elderly, and an obligation expected of individual families for the sake of the national family.

Despite the multi-generational recruitment of men born from 1890 to 1924, leaders linked military service with achieving manhood. As the German invader advanced toward Moscow, Stalin’s Red October anniversary speech explained that “New Soviet men... are being and already have been forged in the fire of the patriotic war and will soon be the terror of the German army.”<sup>8</sup> Fulfilling one’s duty and fighting made a boy a man, as Soviet President Mikhail Kalinin reiterated to an audience of Komsomol youth leaders a week later:

Imagine, a twenty-year-old lad leads a group of men for a distance of fifty kilometers in the rear of the Germans. Five months ago, he was an ordinary youth...but in five months, he has changed into a fighter, into a people’s avenger. You see how quickly youth in our time become fighters, men. In peacetime, this would take years. For those Komsomol members who are at the front, youth is already past, they have become fighters.<sup>9</sup>

These speeches, addressed to the whole country and leading youth activists engaged in the war effort in the rear, explicitly linked manhood to fighting, presenting successful performance as a fighter as the only prerequisite to manhood. Neither mentioned the war’s impact on women, or the multitude of young men who would die without enjoying their new status. Instead, both speeches linked being a man with being a soldier, and emphasized the soldier as an exceptionally masculine figure, which contrasted the implied immaturity of young men remaining in the rear.

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<sup>7</sup> The article also explained that the father had fought the Germans in 1916, thus doubly justifying his absence from the front on grounds of age and past military service. The article provided explanation of why the soldiers’ mother remained in the rear. “Letter of a father and mother to six sons,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 5 July 1941, 2.

<sup>8</sup> J. V. Stalin, *O Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voine Sovetskogo Soiuza* [On the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union] (St. Petersburg: Piter, 2010), 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> M. I. Kalinin, *O Kommunisticheskom Vospitanii i Voinskoi Dolge* [On Communist Education and Soldiers’ Duty] (Moscow: Partizdat, 1962), 491-492.

Women's roles received more coverage than they had before the German invasion, and soldier specific propaganda presented them as fixtures of the rear. As if to pre-empt soldiers' concern for their families, newspapers explained the material aid their families could receive, including free childcare and a monthly 150 ruble allowance. Accompanying the promotion of such measures were unidentified "wives saying: Let our husbands bravely fight at the front, and we will with all our strength help them here."<sup>10</sup> Other articles gave voice to women on the home front reminding soldiers: "Red Army fighter! We are with you."<sup>11</sup> On October 14, "We are marching to meet the enemy!" depicted contrasting masculine and feminine images of soldiers marching "with the sun shining on bayonets, rifles, helmets..." while "...a girl threw flowers to them." After describing how well they marched, the article continued: "There goes a soldier. His wife is next to him. In her hands, [their] little boy."<sup>12</sup> Propaganda thus lauded families that divided in ways that best suited the war effort, and that meant women remaining in the rear. Men could depart for the front without worry because the state would see to their families' care.

Only a few other women's roles received recognition in *Krasnaia Zvezda* in the war's opening months. Like the supportive soldier's wife, articles about women juxtaposed how patriotic men and patriotic women best contributed to the war effort. On 11 July, *Krasnaia Zvezda* ran a full page of letters to soldiers, and categorized them by family relationship. Mothers, wives, sisters and girlfriends sent letters from the rear, alongside one letter between brothers at the front and a pair by elderly fathers who were Red Army veterans.<sup>13</sup> Women usually received credit for their contributions alongside their male combatant relatives. An article titled "Let our blood help wounded soldiers," a young woman explained that "Three of

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<sup>10</sup> "Care for the families of frontline soldiers," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 6 July 1941, 1.

<sup>11</sup> "To the Red Army fighter," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 8 July 1941, 3.

<sup>12</sup> "We are marching to meet the enemy!" *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 14 October 1941, 3.

<sup>13</sup> "Destroy the fascist robbers," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 11 July 1941, 3.

my brothers are at the front... and I want to be useful to the front. Take me as a donor.”<sup>14</sup> On September 26 and 28, two articles about besieged Odessa reported that artillery Captain Denninburg had “at the front three brothers, and a sister nursing at the front,” while bread-factory Stakhanovite M. P. Kokun’ had two exemplary children: “her son Grigorii defends his native Odessa, [and] her daughter Aleksandra volunteered to be a nurse.”<sup>15</sup> All focused on the war effort rather than personal sentiments, and family relationships only served as a convenient structure for contrasting roles.

While such portrayals of women’s contributions might boost soldiers’ morale by showing their fellow citizens’ dedication to their struggle, they also affirmed the masculine ethic of Red Army soldiers’ fundamental motivation consisting of the defense of women and their honor. In the frontline press, such articles continued to rely on juxtaposition, as with the article “In a military hospital.” Among wounded men, there is much camaraderie, even at night, “at that hour even those on cots weren’t sleeping. ‘What division are you from?’ a soldier whispers to the arriving ‘veterans’. And just then news reaches them from the other floor, that ‘neighbors’ have arrived from [fighting near] Elna or Iartsev.” In contrast, the only female patient mentioned, medic Nadia Illarionova, appeared in a drastically different state: “Not long after she began taking the wounded from the field of battle, she blew herself up on a German landmine and there quietly she lays in the family of fighters, never again to retrieve them from battle,” and unable to feed herself.<sup>16</sup> The manageable wounds and vigorous state of the hospital’s men only served to emphasize the seriousness of Illarionova’s condition, and representatively, of the war’s impact on Soviet women generally. Depictions of women like Illarionova emphasized both the need to

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<sup>14</sup> “Let our blood help wounded soldiers,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 11 July 1941, 3.

<sup>15</sup> “A battery outside Odessa,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 26 Sept 1941, p3 “The courage of Soviet warriors” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 28 Sept, 1.

<sup>16</sup> “In a military hospital,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 18 Sept 1941, 3.



defend women from becoming victims of the enemy and how ill-suited they were to the dangers of the front.

Leaders' speeches provided more stark portrayals of women as victims than typically appeared in the press. In August, President Kalinin explained how the Germans "rape and kill our women and girls, in every case without cause" as one of the reasons to liberate Ukraine and Belarus, and in November, Leningrad Party Leader A. A. Zhdanov told soldiers fighting to break the siege that fascists "rape our women and force them into brothels."<sup>17</sup> Although discussed less openly, the specter of rape directly invoked the issue of women's honor, and added an extra dimension to men's duty. The portrayal of women in soldier-specific propaganda, victim and helper alike, presented the war effort as a struggle with distinctly masculine and feminine contributions to be made at the front and in the rear. While articles hinted at the variety of women's contributions to the war effort, even at the front, they focused on women in long-established feminine roles, and depicted them as victims of the war as much as active participants, without any of the heroism attributed to male soldiers.

Among soldiers and military-age men, the distinction between front and rear operated in a very similar way. When the German invasion began, Soviet teens who had not yet begun military service faced distinct questions because they could choose between volunteering and waiting for a mobilization order from the military committee later in the year. A young man with a draft-exempt mining job explained his decision-making process: "what would I be saying when the war is over? That the rear also needed able men, especially in the mines, to work for the nation's defense? This is true. But you can't explain this to everyone; convince everyone.

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<sup>17</sup> Kalinin, 480. RGASPI Fond 77 Opis 1 Delo 931, List 50.

Even girls are summoned to the front. But I wanted to live so much!”<sup>18</sup> The apparent incongruity of an able-bodied young man remaining in the rear, especially if some girls lacked that option, seemed to prevail over other considerations. A recent university graduate, married but without children, felt the impact of leaving the rear in a different way: “It seemed pointless to sleep on the floor in the school when I could go home and see my wife off to the evacuation, and carry her trunk to the assembly point ... It was our final moment together and we both understood it might be for good. At that moment I felt the war more keenly than when I was issued with a rifle.”<sup>19</sup> Leaving home, family, and civilian life provide a dramatic break for young men volunteering for combat. Moving toward the enemy and danger appeared to be their role in the war, while women stayed behind or moved farther away.

Young men felt strong social pressures to volunteer after the first days of war had past. Such pressures came in a variety of forms, including simple scorn from elderly citizens, as two recruits told their comrades after leaving Leningrad for training: “it had been impossible to walk the streets, as every person they encountered had been indignant over the fact that two healthy students were not in the army.”<sup>20</sup> Their age, gender, and bodily integrity alone made them targets, and neither official justification nor their explanations of imminent departure for service were likely to satisfy civilian critics. Even full knowledge of an official exemption did not stop criticism for some: “I had an education waiver until the completion of my technical training. Sometimes I could hear people around me saying ‘He’s paid them all off! Look at him walking around like such a smart aleck!’ Their words shamed me.”<sup>21</sup> The range of criticism and social pressure extended into military training, where crude jokes were common forms of motivation:

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<sup>18</sup> Mansur Abdulin, *Red Road from Stalingrad* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books, 2004), 9.

<sup>19</sup> As a newly mobilized volunteer, he was to sleep in a local school with other new soldiers before marching out the next day. Nikolai I. Obryn’ya, *Red Partisan* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2007), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Petr Mikhin, *Guns Against the Reich* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books, 2010), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Nikolai Litvin, *800 Days on the Eastern Front* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 3.

“Keep your heads, noses, and checks up! Look at the girls looking at you! Their smiles say that they would not open their legs to you, but would at least think about it!”<sup>22</sup> The training officer’s comment suggested that young men also could look forward to a positive impact on social status for serving at the front. Such comments, whatever their impact on their recipients, conveyed to young men that their place was at the front alone, with the usually implicit corollary message that only women, children, and the elderly had a right to remain in the rear.

The rear appeared as an unambiguously feminine realm for those young men who remained after the first weeks of war, when the bulk of draftees, reservists, and volunteers had been dispatched to the front or training areas. A teenage boy, finally accepted into the Red Army underage in 1943, found himself among the women and children who greeted soldiers at the station as their train stopped: “Some stout older women, and we teenagers, brought buckets full of water to the soldiers, and many peasant girls gave them eggs, milk, bread, tobacco – wiping away tears.”<sup>23</sup> Recruits marching to join their units at the front witnessed similar scenes in villages, “where our column would be greeted by women of various ages, sometimes approaching us alone, sometimes in small groups... The most touching of all in these short encounters were the motherly parting words and the wishes for us to remain safe and unharmed, which rose from the hearts of these simple rural women, often as they wiped a tear.”<sup>24</sup> While the kindness of women appeared to soldiers as a sort of proxy care they wished their own male relatives to receive elsewhere, some men experienced hospitality of a different sort. A young factory committee agent reported how “there were virtually no men of military age in the village; they had all been called up for the army. Sensing the covetous glances of the women, I would

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<sup>22</sup> Aleksandr V. Pyl’tsyn, *Shtrafnoi Udar* [Penalty Strike] (Moscow: Znanie, 2003), 18.

<sup>23</sup> Ivan Yakushkin, *On the Roads of War* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2005), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Isaak Kobylanskiy, *From Stalingrad to Pillau* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 45.

get flustered and feel uncomfortable,” after which he had to flee from the advances of an older woman who found him in the *bania*.<sup>25</sup> His experiences there prompted him to volunteer at once.

Young men experienced the rear as a feminine space in 1941, whether they had yet to join the ranks or as they moved to the front with their units. While millions of men remained in the rear for much or all of the war, soldiers remembered themselves as either transgressors or passively out of place among the civilian population of Soviet cities and villages. Their civilian world in which they previously belonged had immediately become the part of past, and their future lay at the front.<sup>26</sup> Mobilization policy and popular reactions brought about this change directly, although official rhetoric likely influenced the older civilians who expected to see no able-bodied young men in their midst for the duration of the conflict. While young men expressed little about what their families would or should be doing for the war effort, those who eventually volunteered, and therefore wrote about the early days of war as a pre-military experience, believed that they had yet to join their proper place as young men at the front. The masculine character of the front appeared only implicitly, and most young men had no more than a vague awareness of what war or combat demanded, but they believed or quickly learned from others that their wartime duty called them away from the rear.

For those young men who reached the front soon after the war began, the experience could prove as disorienting as it was for those who remained and felt that their home regions had transformed into a feminine rear space in which they ceased to belong. A future tank commander remembered his feelings upon his unit’s first deployment to the front: “In November

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<sup>25</sup> The *bania* is a traditional Russian steam bath house usually segregated by gender. Boris Gorbachevsky, *Through the Maelstrom* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 3-4.

<sup>26</sup> This characterization of the rear as separate from the front in space, and separate in time from their future at the front, resembles the depiction of space that Katerina Clark has identified in Socialist Realism. Katerina Clark, “Socialist Realism and the Sacralizing of Space,” in *The Landscape of Stalinism*, ed. Evgeny Dobrenko et al. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 14-16.

our battalion was sent the Moscow outskirts. When we were on the road, silence was critical. The men were not battle-seasoned, and hence nervous. Everyone was worrying about their first action and the chances of surviving it.”<sup>27</sup> Deployed rapidly around Moscow and Leningrad, many young men had no time to adjust to life as soldiers, like a sniper who daydreamed of home on his first patrol at the front “staring at the woman, I thought of my native Belorussia. There were many times when my own mother had hoisted a yoke with baskets onto her shoulders... Kruglov’s soft voice interrupted my reflections.”<sup>28</sup> Many men had trouble moving past their civilian lives and dealing with the realities of military service. An artilleryman recalled pre-combat hardships his comrades struggled to endure: “Most of the officers and men in the training camps longed for the front with only one aim in mind: to get a full stomach. Some of the soldiers could not endure this life, and while standing guard at night with their rifles, shot themselves.”<sup>29</sup> While such incidents were extreme cases, they reflect the difficulty with which civilian men began military service, even before they faced the German onslaught of late 1941.

For those men persevered and lived through it, their first battle allowed them to begin to the gradual process of thinking of themselves as soldiers. Many sought to understand the front from civilian points of reference, like a sniper who thought of a childhood episode during his first day in the trenches: “I’m eight years old, and my father is teaching me to shoot... Was I disturbed by the thought that it was not hazel-grouses I as hunting, but human beings? I had something else on my mind.”<sup>30</sup> After surviving the first day, and there were few first days at the front in 1941 that did not include combat, troops began to consider life at the front:

And so the battle we had just been through was something of a dress rehearsal. Before it, we hadn’t seen the enemy, and even when he was shooting at us, we

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<sup>27</sup> Vasilii Bryukhov, *Red Army Tank Commander* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2012), 12.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Pilyushin, *Red Sniper on the Eastern Front* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2010), 2.

<sup>29</sup> Mikhin, 8.

<sup>30</sup> Abdulin, 11.

couldn't believe that he might be killed. Putting on a trench coat doesn't make a soldier. To kill – even to save your life – means turning upside-down all the thoughts and feelings in your mind and heart....

The first battle, especially if it ended with success, not just survival, marked a real wartime change for men coming from civilian life or even peacetime service. It distinguished their role in the war effort compared to the aspects of war their families encountered in the rear. Moreover, the violence soldiers discovered they were capable of in combat seemed to be a type of experience that only men shared.

Soldier specific-propaganda and soldiers' own experiences divided the war effort between masculine front and feminine rear in the first months of war. Official rhetoric consistently presented scenes of families patriotically separating for their respective roles in front and rear to emphasize this aspect of the war effort. The gendered division of labor also reflected a hierarchy of power, in which Stalin led the troops, the latter defended Soviet women and children, and women and oldsters in the rear worked to aid men at the front. This hierarchy in soldier-specific propaganda reflected the Red Army's foundational masculine ethic of national defense, but ignored military-age men working in the rear, the danger civilians faced from advancing German forces and air raids, and women's early presence in non-combatant front roles. Many young men accepted this division and felt compelled to volunteer for the front, often pressured or alienated from the rear because it no longer seemed to be a space for them. However, leaving loved ones proved more difficult than patriotic send-offs in the press suggested, and men found it even more of a struggle to gain their bearings at the front. Once in forward positions, soldiers faced the test of combat, which combat proved to be a second leap away from the civilian rear, but did not enable an easy transition to new, soldierly selves.

## **Uniting the individual and the collective**

Alongside the gendered distinctions between front and rear, soldier-specific propaganda promoted a sense of collective struggle to motivate soldiers. This effort to explain to soldiers why they were fighting, which included individual examples of ideal servicemen, operated on two tracks. The first emphasized soldiers' duty to the people, who counted on their protection. The second presented the brotherly collective fighting men might join, which revived notions of masculine community at the front, but reoriented those groups around Stalin's fatherly leadership in defense of the motherland. Soldiers echoed little of this collective affiliation with the people and national leadership in their response to the first months of fighting. Personal loyalties and links to family remained strong among the Red Army rank-and file. Although men at the front no longer petitioned for discharge, they expressed their duty in personal terms, and remained focused on providing for their families from afar.

An emphasis on the collective nature of the struggle against the German invader reinforced depictions of family separation as a sign of Soviet patriotism. The day after Stalin's national address on 3 July 1941, articles such as "The warriors' oath" or "Frontline soldiers' oath" began to appear in *Krasnaia Zvezda*. Inspired by Stalin's words and with confidence in his leadership, these articles presented soldiers made vows such as "Everyone is ready to give his life in the name of the motherland, in the name of Stalin, in the name of our victory!"<sup>31</sup> The ideal soldiers of propaganda expressed a sustaining motivation for all soldiers in their oaths, without any hint of worry about their families' safety or their local communities' security. As the crisis deepened over the summer, President Kalinin addressed a new class of Red Army political workers on the subject before they deployed to the front. He presented the issue in

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<sup>31</sup> "The warriors' oath," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 4 July 1941, 1. Quotation from "Frontline soldiers' oath," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 22 July 1941, 2.

terms of what political workers needed to convey, without subtlety, not the way they should say it:

The generation that is now between twenty and forty years old, has had history assign it the greatest honor – the struggle for communism against fascism. ... That means: forget the grandparents, wives, and children, it means putting forth the struggle for communism as his main idea and goal, and to make everything else derivative. That's what it means. And if in the struggle for communism, people will be giving forty percent to their children and the family in general, and only the remainder to the struggle, then the business will be bad. I do not mean to say, that nothing should be sent to family, but that it would be only derivative, and the struggle for communism – primary. That's my point.<sup>32</sup>

The connection between family and the struggle for communism had varied in Soviet culture, and Kalinin tapped into old Soviet fears of the family, which was often coded feminine as a source of opposition to revolutionary change.<sup>33</sup> In wartime, this meant a zero-sum equation of personal concerns for relatives weakening devotion to the collective aim of defeating fascism. Oath-making soldiers personified this devotion, as they put no personal concern ahead of their contribution to victory.

Official rhetoric promised soldiers an eternal place in the supranational Soviet family to complement their unwavering focus on the national war effort. Battle heroes received praise as “the embodiment of a heroic Stalinist generation of Soviet men,” and “a vast family of winged heroes of the patriotic war.” The price to belong was high; such men were “meeting death with open eyes, but first striking the enemy dead.”<sup>34</sup> Such heroes, proven in battle and linked to Stalin's before as well as during the war, consistently situated them in a fraternal community at the front. Even fighters that received scarce mention in 1941 earned a place in this brotherhood by following Stalin's leadership and fighting well. The sole *Krasnaia Zvezda* editorial to address

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<sup>32</sup> Derivative: производным; primary: основным. Mikhail Kalinin, “Speech to students of the high military courses of the political staff of the RKKA” 19 Aug 1941 RGASPI Fond 78 Opis 1 Delo 852 Listy 5-6.

<sup>33</sup> In particular, propaganda attributed the continuation of religious practices to women. Anne Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 34-35.

<sup>34</sup> “Winged heroes of the patriotic war,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 9 July 1941, 1.



partisans ordered: “Brother partisans! With greater strength transform into living deeds the great words of Stalin” and concluded “The Red Army sends soldierly greetings to brother-partisans.”<sup>35</sup> An equally rare acknowledgement of non-Slavic soldiers praised the heroism of “sons of the Soviet Caucasus” as part the “brotherhood of peoples that has always been a powerful weapon,” which needed three quotations of Stalin to justify.<sup>36</sup> Such articles emphasized collective belonging as a masculine status soldiers earned, and one that transcended individual family, nationality, and front or unit of combat. Heroism remained the product of Stalin’s paternal leadership, which made both unity and success possible according to propaganda narratives, just as it had in labor and record-breaking feats before the war.<sup>37</sup>

For soldiers at the front, whether volunteers or conscripts, physical separation from family did not mean a single-minded focus on the war effort in line with Soviet leaders’ goals. Troops’ priorities remained focused on their families, and coexisted alongside their willingness to fight. The most drastic change from the peacetime expression of these priorities was the drop in petitions for complete exemption from military service from soldiers claiming that “I have to work...” in order to support female or elderly dependents.<sup>38</sup> Instead, Red Army men accepted the necessity of caring for their families from afar, attempting to provide for their material and emotional well-being through letters. These efforts consisted of two major approaches: showing concern for their families, and trying to minimize their families’ concern for them.

Soldiers’ views regarding the home front were implicit in how they wrote to female relations. One soldier wrote his wife “we just deflected an enemy attack. Now we are going to

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<sup>35</sup> “Glory to partisans – heroes of the patriotic war,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 7 August 1941, 1.

<sup>36</sup> “The Red Army is strong with the great friendship of peoples,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 16 October 1941, 1.

<sup>37</sup> Katernia Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 114.

<sup>38</sup> GARF Fond 7523 Opis 26 Delo 293 List 47.

the front line... take care of the children.”<sup>39</sup> Letter contents usually contrasted discussions of men enduring at the front and women showing patriotism by being feminine caregivers or loyal supporters on the home front. In this way, soldiers wrote to thank unacquainted female gift-givers: “Everyone was very happy, that we in our rear have such patriots, who tirelessly care about their army.”<sup>40</sup> Whether family members or generic caring girls, most soldiers wished to see the home front as a simple feminine complement to the masculine battlefield, where women performed their patriotic duty by providing soldiers with emotional support. The depictions of women in *Krasnaia Zvezda* suggest a shared view of feminine gender roles in the war effort.

A central component to troops’ interest in loved ones’ situation in the rear was the specific and limited way they discussed their own situation at the front. Soldiers’ main concern in letter writing was to reassure their families of their safety, which compelled them to minimize the amount of detail they provided about battles, leading to simple messages such as “I am alive and well, standing in the ranks of the defenders of native Moscow; don’t worry about me, write me at the address...”<sup>41</sup> Efforts to reassure their families complemented soldiers’ demonstration of concern, and some actively sought to shift the focus from themselves to the home front, as one soldier did in a letter to his pregnant wife: “I feel well, am alive and healthy, and wish you the same. Look after yourself, you have probably become plump, take care of yourself and our future child.”<sup>42</sup> Such priorities also help explain why soldiers appeared so indifferent to proving their manliness with stories of battle or their exploits, because enduring the hardships of the front without complaint and continuing to provide for their families sufficed.

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<sup>39</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1411/23 List 1.

<sup>40</sup> RGASPI Fond 17 Opis 125 Delo 73 List 84. A Communist Party resolution in September created a program of gift-giving to soldiers, focusing on warm clothes. *KPSS o Vooruzhennikh Silax Sovetskogo Soiuzza*, (Moscow: Partizdat, 1981), 310-311.

<sup>41</sup> GARF Fond 6903 Opis 9 Delo 41 List 64.

<sup>42</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 210 List 3.

Accordingly, soldiers were more likely to report “I am alive and healthy, and wish you the same. I have no special news,” than they were to provide the details of frontline exploits.<sup>43</sup> Such silences helped soldiers to minimize familial concerns, and avoid appearing overwhelmed by the trials of battle. In virtually every letter they wrote, soldiers mentioned that they were alive and healthy. This beginning or concluding status essentially became a convention of letters, but stands out as the only one that appeared in private and public letters, rather than political slogans, awards won, or enemies killed. Variations and elaborations of this simple comment were integral to soldiers’ efforts to minimize the emotional strain of separation and potential loss through letter writing.

Perhaps the most basic component of soldiers’ performance of masculinity in letters was the consistent expression of concern for families’ health, safety, and daily lives. These naturally carried over from peacetime hardship in many families that the war only worsened. An infantryman remembered his pessimistic mood upon leaving for the front in late 1941: “I went to the army with a heavy heart; I knew that my parents would be lost without me.”<sup>44</sup> Soldiers consistently wrote to ask about their families’ well-being, despite their position at the front being more dangerous, as one soldier wrote his sister: “write me a few words about mother and how her health is!”<sup>45</sup> A break in correspondence from the front often horrified families at home, but young soldiers frequently wrote to their mothers to demonstrate a similar concern: “I have not received a single letter from you and do not know your address, old or new. I also don’t know how you live, or with whom, alone or with Katia,” or after a longer period of silence, “I want to

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<sup>43</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1412/1 List 1.

<sup>44</sup> Recollections of Ilia G. Gekhtman in *A my s toboi, brat, iz pekhoti* [And we are with you, brother, from the infantry], ed. Artem Drabkin (Moscow, 2012), 214.

<sup>45</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 485 List 1.

know if you are even still alive.”<sup>46</sup> Soldiers almost always framed their complaint in terms of worry for their family, turning on its head the civilian fear over silence from the front as a sign of death, rather than overtly state their need to have an outlet from the rigors of frontline life in the letters of their female relatives.

Beyond the symbolic protective concern Red Army men sought to demonstrate through letters, pay telegrams acted as a tangible means of performing the role of “provider-at-war.” Some soldiers linked sending money with worry for their family’s well-being, with simple messages stating “I sent you money, report if you received the money. I have not received a letter from you in a long time,” or “I already sent you several letters, but I have not received one from you. Little Dorothy I sent your mother 1400 rubles...”<sup>47</sup> Unable to fully perform their role in correspondence with unresponsive female relatives, such soldiers employed the alternative approach of sending real material aid. Of course, material concern extended beyond sending pay, as one soldier wrote his wife: “you should live with my family; they will provide you with accommodations right now.”<sup>48</sup> Soldiers in regular contact with home were no less willing to send money, since their families were often in desperate conditions. Some even sought to provide for the material well-being two sets of dependents, such as a Red Army volunteer who told his pregnant wife: “you will receive 700 rubles from which I ask you to give 200 rubles to [my] father and mother.”<sup>49</sup> Financial contributions could help soldiers preserve an element of continuity with their civilian role in their family by simulating the cycle of work and pay. Sending pay also allowed men at the front to show care in a concrete manner as well as shift

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<sup>46</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 331 List 3; RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 457 List 1.

<sup>47</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 116 List 2; RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 474 List 1.

<sup>48</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 18.

<sup>49</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 220 List 1.

attention from their dangerous situation to what they could do to improve their loved ones' situation at home.

Protective concern also appeared in the form of fathers' efforts to remain active as parents. Fathers sought to demonstrate concern and assert continued status as manly providers by showing intensive interest in their children's care, and especially their schooling. While some asked simple questions, such as "how is Lucy studying?", others encouraged their children to study as a form of patriotism: "study to help win victory over the reptilian enemy more quickly."<sup>50</sup> This specific interest in children also sought to downplay the crisis situations that came and went at the front, as one sapper attempted in a letter written while defending against the German drive on Moscow: "I was already in battle and today have a furlough in Moscow – and then again to battle. How are Inessa's studies?"<sup>51</sup> Other soldier-fathers sought to re-assert their masculine status by taking a still more active role, writing to each child individually, to ask specific questions about problems in school, teachers, and extra-curricular activities, with one father promising his son a "gift to make you study better and successfully complete 7<sup>th</sup> grade."<sup>52</sup> Through such interventions, Red Army men sought to diminish the impact of their absence and alleviate their families' anxieties by devoting time to domestic matters without complaining about life at the front.

Also noteworthy is what Red Army men left unsaid. While they proved willing to make elaborate oaths on numerous issues, most of which were arguably obvious, few, even political workers or party members, mentioned the Communist party or ideology, while Stalin appeared only as a military leader, if mentioned at all. Soldiers frequently promised parents that "I will not let the Germans bring you grief," while cadets complained "what a shame that I am not being

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<sup>50</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 394 List 1; RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 100 List 2.

<sup>51</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 100 List 1.

<sup>52</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 92 List 1.

sent from training to the front because I really want to go, and strike at those man-eaters” or explained that “our hatred of the fascists is inexhaustible.”<sup>53</sup> Such comments expressed relatively common sentiments about the enemy, and yet most felt compelled to state and often repeat them in letters home. When writing to the state radio commission, with no illusions of privacy, soldiers consistently declared their hatred of the enemy, calling the Germans “fiends,” “filth,” “vipers,” and “bloody cannibals,” but provided virtually no corresponding praise for Stalin or the government, even among those letters selected and approved for broadcast.<sup>54</sup>

This is not to say that the Red Army lacked committed party members or supporters of the government, but party members and even political workers were likely to state “I send you my Bolshevik greetings” or something similarly brief and then focus on family concerns.<sup>55</sup> Comments such as “I am ready to travel to the front and ready, like a Komsomol, to die for the cause of the Party of Lenin-Stalin” were extremely rare.<sup>56</sup> Such sentiments seem improbable as widely-held but unstated beliefs, given soldiers’ verbose cursing of the enemy, among other recurring comments. Instead, the frequency of obvious oaths on subjects other than political loyalty suggests that soldiers’ commitment to the war effort quickly became far more important and more personal than the achievement of a Communist party cause. Ultimately, patriotic or ideological concerns remained secondary matters in soldiers’ letters home. Efforts to provide for and reassure primarily-female family members shaped these letters more than any other concern.

Red Army fighters’ sustaining motivation stemmed from their devotion to their families. Soldiers’ desire to defend their individual families from harm operated as both a direct motivation for some and as a synthesis with the national cause for those not directly threatened.

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<sup>53</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1104 List 1; RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 400 List 11; RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 778 List 2.

<sup>54</sup> RGASPI Fond 17 Opis 125 Delo 73 List 74-76.

<sup>55</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 100 List 2.

<sup>56</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 116 List 1.

Among soldiers from the western areas of the USSR, the former was an urgent priority, as one wounded soldier referenced familiar towns as he explained his determination to continue fighting: “My wife, just as the war began, I was located in Tartakovo, 8km from the town of Sokol’...The first battle I came to fight was on June 22 in the region of Sokol’.”<sup>57</sup> In the late summer, Red Army soldiers outside Leningrad emphasized the importance of directly defending their homes: “Finally my dream has been realized, I am defending my home city, striking at the fascist reptiles... I will not disgrace the name of my home city. Be sure of that.”<sup>58</sup> Such soldiers did not need to fight for the figurative motherland, as they had more tangible women to defend. Their immediate responsibility consisted of providing for their families’ safety, and functioned as a clear motivation to fight.

The rapid nature of the German advance in 1941 meant that fewer soldiers had the opportunity to fight for their families directly, since so many regions fell under German occupation within weeks.<sup>59</sup> With families either in the distant rear or under enemy occupation, most troops accepted the link between their families’ well-being and national defense. Some Red Army men made the connection directly, presenting their service as part of the larger effort that helped keep the Soviet people safe, whatever their family’s immediate danger: “proudly rejoice, that your son defends you, and the whole people.”<sup>60</sup> Another soldier asked his wife to tell their children that their “father fights for their future, for our glorious motherland.”<sup>61</sup> For other soldiers, loved ones remained the reason for fighting, even on a distant front. One soldier explained to his sister and mother “tomorrow I will go to protect the family,” and another told his

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<sup>57</sup> RGASPI Fond 17 Opis 125 Delo 73 List 75-76.

<sup>58</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 222 List 4.

<sup>59</sup> German forces captured all major cities between the border and Moscow by July 16. Richard Overy, *Russia’s War* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 86.

<sup>60</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1104 List 1.

<sup>61</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 282 List 5.

parents: “My dear [ones], be sure, that I will fight for your freedom to the last drop of blood,” despite each families’ distance from the front in both cases.<sup>62</sup>

While the tone of such comments varied, from proud statement to grudging acknowledgement, many soldiers reasoned that the successful defense of the country was essential to their families’ safety. However, such a synthesis did not constitute a wholesale acceptance of the motives or conduct of soldier-heroes promoted in official rhetoric. Unlike civilian newspapers, *Krasnaia Zvezda* did not present family security as a motive of heroic figures or the army at large, and promoted the defense of the motherland and loyalty to Stalin as ideal soldiers’ inspiration to perform exploits and face death. In contrast, *Krasnaia Zvezda* continued to present heroes as members of a (multi-)national brotherhood led by Stalin whose motives carried over from the exploits of 1930s aviation record-setters, polar explorers, and fictional characters of socialist realism. Even the masculine ethic of defending women’s honor remained situated at the national level, protecting Soviet women in general, since letters attributed to family members in soldier-specific propaganda omitted any mention of sons and husbands keeping their families from harm. Red Army soldiers expressed a separate set of priorities focused on personal connections to their families that remained absent from official rhetoric, but lacked any treasonous or defeatist content. Reflecting their difficult transition to wartime as citizen-soldiers, a synthesis of personal and national motivations kept many troops going in the difficult months of fighting retreat toward Leningrad, Moscow, and Rostov-on-Don.

### **Defending home and homeland**

The ideal Red Army fighter received its fullest portrayal in the hero profiles that figured prominently in soldier specific propaganda. Alongside the why of collective struggle, examples of combat heroism present troops with official expectations for how they should fulfill their duty

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<sup>62</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 485 List 1. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1412/1 List 1.



in battle against the enemy. Sacrificial death appeared as the greatest expression of fighters' personal contribution to the national collective. Women's deaths at the enemy's hands provided a point of contrast, in which loyal women died admirably but passively, and reinforced the extent of the crisis soldiers were charged with stopping. Such extreme expectations found few adherents among the rank and file, who sought to live and return home after the war. The experiences of combat and the suffering of wounded comrades gave soldiers few incentives to pursue heroism over their families' care.

As they realized the extent of the danger the country faced, Soviet and Red Army leaders sought to inspire men not just to fight, but to perform heroic exploits and make sacrifices equal in magnitude to the desperate wartime situation. Returning to the form of Finnish War reporting, but with a drastically different message, the Red Army's political administration presented a new masculine ideal for soldiers to aspire to, which differed greatly from the "collective combatant" examples of heroism and ideal conduct offered before the invasion began.<sup>63</sup> Officials in the Political Administration of the Red Army (PUR) prioritized heroes and heroic exploits from the outset of the war. On the eve of the invasion, a ciphered telegram to political leaders of all regions and fronts from Deputy Commissar of Defense A. I. Zaporozhets outlined priorities for military propaganda as the "widespread display of the successes achieved by units, and the individual soldiers and commanders in these successful units."<sup>64</sup> Echoing this order ten days into the war, a July 2 article in *Krasnaia Zvezda* approvingly surveyed frontline newspapers' focus on heroic exploits as appropriate to how the war was being fought.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Lev Mekhlis, as propaganda head, delivered a report to this effect about propaganda effectiveness among the troops. Carl Van Dyke, "The Timoshenko Reforms: March-July 1940" *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* vol. 9 no. 1 (March 1996), p 85-86. After June 29, *Krasnaia Zvezda* again included hero profiles, as it had late in the Finnish War.

<sup>64</sup> Zaporozhets' telegram focuses on the enactment of Ministry of Defense order #30, which he summarizes in the quoted selection. RGASPI Fond 17 Opis 125 Delo 60 p 55-57.

<sup>65</sup> "Unprecedented Heroism," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 2 July 1941, 3.

On June 29, the lead editorial and hero profiles accompanying it on page 2 of *Krasnaia Zvezda* broke with prewar presentations of the “collective combatant” soldierly masculinity. Its title, “Stalinist Falcons, with honor fulfill your duty to the motherland!” immediately invoked traditional ideas of masculine honor and duty, which were well established in military traditions of both the Tsarist Empire and Soviet Union.<sup>66</sup> The editorial focused on two exploits, the first involving a fighter pilot’s cunning defensive tactics against enemy bombers, and the second on another pilot’s relentless desire to “finish the fascist reptile.” During his fifth sortie of the day, Lieutenant Kuz’min had fired all of his ammunition and been wounded several times. Rather than leave the battle and allow the enemy to escape, he repeatedly attempted to ram an enemy plane, and on the fourth try, was able to destroy the enemy plane by sacrificing his own. The following paragraph, returning to an editorial tone, explained the importance of such “immortal exploits of the heroes of the patriotic war.” Rather than an isolated incident of extreme self-sacrifice, the editorial explained that “the war has only begun. There are still many brutal battles ahead... Struggle with a treacherous enemy requires serious effort and sacrifices.”<sup>67</sup> Lt. Kuz’min’s feat exemplified the ultimate sacrifice as well as the utmost performance of steadfastness, because he did not immediately retreat once his ammunition ran out, and cunning, by using his plane as a weapon when there no others on hand. A call for sacrifice immediately following an example of heroic death in battle thus inaugurated the “sacrificial defender” ideal of masculine heroism.

The new focus on the heroism of the exploit, or *podvig*, had its origins in Russian Orthodox Christianity, and retained some of those characteristics in the Soviet wartime usage of the term, and even in the record breaking exploits of the 1930s. An act worthy to be called a

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<sup>66</sup> Joshua Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), 144-146.

<sup>67</sup> “Lieutenant Kuz’min,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 29 June 1941, 1.

*podvig* demanded some type of suffering or self-sacrifice. In the Russian Christian context, the *podvig* rested on “denial of ‘the world,’ denial of this mortal life as real life, denial of material force as real force, denial of speech as real speech.” More than any other, “The act of Jesus on the mountain denying the road that led to the empire of the world in favor of the road that led to an ignoble death is a *podvig* - denial of the world.”<sup>68</sup> Their motives were radically different, but the actions of soldier heroes involved choosing suffering and denying life and survival as dishonorable in favor of death. Of course, the similarities have clear limits, since Red Army soldiers’ objectives were decidedly of the world, and victory after their deaths did not equal a heavenly reward. Perhaps most importantly, soldier-specific propaganda did not consider a passive death to be a *podvig*. Unlike Christian martyrdom, a combat *podvig* demanded destruction of the enemy as a consequence of the hero’s death.

Perhaps the most famous of such cases, the exploit of Captain Gastelo first appeared as a brief dispatch on July 6, and then as a proper hero profile, discussing his motives, on July 10. Gastelo, fitting the mould of Sr. Lt. Kuz’min, and himself emulated in September by Lieutenant Mamontov, performed a sacrificial exploit with his plane. In battle over enemy territory, enemy fire ignited his plane’s fuel tank. Although he could have ejected with his parachute and survived as a captive, Gastelo chose instead to “end his life neither with a crash nor as a captive, but with a [heroic] exploit,” and crashed his plane into a column of enemy tanks.<sup>69</sup> Truer to Sr. Lt. Kuz’min’s original example, Lt. Mamontov “died a hero’s death” by ramming an enemy bomber, rather than land safely and let the enemy bomber survive.<sup>70</sup> Such active deaths distinguished heroes from other men, presenting fearless devotion to victory as the true measure of a fighting man, while the devotion of soldiers who over-valued their lives remained unproven.

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<sup>68</sup> Stephen Graham, *The Way of Martha and The Way of Mary* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1915), 111.

<sup>69</sup> “Captain Gastelo,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 10 July 1941, 2.

<sup>70</sup> “The Immortal exploit of lieutenant Mamontov,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 4 September 1941, 2.

The growing number of reports of soldiers dying heroically lacked any real tactical imperative for them to die fighting, and instead emphasized soldiers' active choice to sacrifice themselves because they were so determined to kill the enemy. *Krasnaia Zvezda* presented such exploits as ideal behavior early on. An editorial on 8 July celebrated how Sr. Lt. Volkov "decided to destroy the enemy with his plane, as [if it were] an artillery shell." Following the exploit, the editorial explained that "this is how the party of Lenin-Stalin educated our people... Let the exploits of heroes, showing [their] quality in battle, about which comrade Stalin spoke, inspire all frontline soldiers, teach them bravery and courage, [and] instill in their soul confidence in victory." The editorial cited Stalin's approval for sacrificial death in combat, and attributed the character required to perform such exploits to his leadership. Stalin retained a key role, since the "brilliant combat quality of Soviet warriors" derived from the "Stalinist generation of defenders of the motherland."<sup>71</sup> Even though such exploits usually focused on individuals and sometimes small groups, heroes' motives remained rooted in Stalin's leadership and a collective duty to defend the motherland.

The exploits of Kuzmin and Gastello began a series of examples of sacrifice presented in official rhetoric in 1941, which focused on the motherland as a source of motivation for desperate exploits. The article "A heroic divisional commander" presented the heroic twelve day resistance of a unit outnumbered and outgunned by German tank units. The battle culminated in the death of two soldiers: "knowing that death threatened them... calmly did their duty and were killed, like heroes" blowing up the bridge they had wired with explosives just as a German tank began to cross. Ignoring the larger military implications of such a battle, the article concluded by emphasizing what motivated such exploits: "Love for the motherland and contempt for death,

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<sup>71</sup> "Know no fear in battle, bravely and courageously advance at the enemy," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 8 July 1941, 1.

those are the distinctive features of the heroes of the division.”<sup>72</sup> On September 18, an article detailed the heroics of ten Soviet “epic heroes,” who after repulsing an enemy infantry attack, faced ten German tanks. Their commander declared “Comrades, we may die, but we will not yield a step!” and his men followed him to their deaths, but succeeded in destroying three tanks and blunting the German advance. The article presented these events in a positive light, explaining “Ten Soviet patriots, loving the motherland more than their lives, were killed, but did not falter, and did not yield.”<sup>73</sup> In every case, stories of soldiers’ exploits emphasize how love of the motherland prompted them to choose to die fighting, but suggest that desperate circumstances helped prompt such heroics, which propaganda celebrated to normalize and justify the bleak scenarios soldiers faced.

Such examples of death as an active choice, and death as an act of killing the enemy, also contrasted with the passive deaths of female martyrs, even though both died as faithful patriots. Even before Zoia Kosmodemianskaia became the preeminent female icon of the war, female martyrs appeared in soldier specific propaganda.<sup>74</sup> Zoia’s story bore considerable resemblance to the one recounted in the article “Daughter of a partisan.” The article reported how a young woman, Tania, refused to provide information about her father’s detachment, and instead attacked her interrogator. Later, the German executed her, spilling their “innocent young blood”

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<sup>72</sup> Such a desperate defensive tactic, destroying one’s own bridges, signals a unit’s inability to hold a position, and the need to rely on a water barrier to delay the enemy’s advance instead. “A heroic divisional commander,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 24 July, 1941, 2.

<sup>73</sup> “The Exploit of Lieutenant Petrov and his fighting comrades,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 18 September 1941, 2.

<sup>74</sup> Captured after setting fire to a German stable, Zoia endured interrogation and torture but refused to give up her partisan detachment. Her captors executed her as a result, and left her dead body in the snow. Found by advancing Red Army forces a short time later, she quickly became a popular sensation. For a study of the myth of Zoia’s martyrdom, Adrienne Marie Harris, *The Myth of the Woman Warrior in World War II in Soviet Culture* (PhD Thesis, University of Kansas, 2008), esp. Chapter 2 “Молчать, как Партизанка: The Woman Warrior-Martyr.”

because she would not betray the motherland.<sup>75</sup> *Krasnaia Zvezda* depicted such deaths as tragic, rather than heroic events, which demanded revenge, rather than emulation.

Combined with the broader portrayal of women's victimization by the enemy, the sacrificial defender ideal marked a clear distinction between the deaths of Soviet citizens as active and masculine or passive and feminine. Outside of specific tragic deaths, articles about events at the front contained frequent references to women suffering the consequences of enemy violence without causing any harm in response. The profile of a soldier noted how he "remembered the enemy's burning of villages, the streets of cities, corpses of women and children, shot like animals..."<sup>76</sup> Such deaths seem to have one purpose, to prompt an angry response to the brutal treatment of Soviet civilians. In a medical battalion near the front, "Doctors conducted operations and stitched wounds under artillery bombardment. During one such operation a [shell] fragment killed doctor Liberova. They buried her at night. Making a small hillock, they covered their little baby girl."<sup>77</sup> Use of the diminutive familiar form to describe her burial evokes the tragic loss of a loved one, not the problems losing a skilled surgeon would cause for military medical care. The senselessness of her death was typical of such articles, and emphasized victimization instead of a final contribution to victory. At best, women's passive deaths involved an admirable degree of loyalty to Stalin and the war, but marked feminine figures as unable to defend the country or kill the enemy. Such articles depicted the consequences of enemy action on women in order to bolster the merit of the masculine ethic as a further motivation to fight.

Willingness to choose death to further harm the enemy was essential to the "sacrificial defender" ideal, but not all heroes died performing their exploits. Hero profiles presented the

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<sup>75</sup>"Daughter of a partisan," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 3 October 1941, 4.

<sup>76</sup>"Senior Lieutenant Volkov," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 5 July 1941, 3.

<sup>77</sup> They covered their little baby girl: прикрепили дочешку. "Medical battalion," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 16 Sept 1941, 2.

survival of men like Lieutenant Tarasov, for whom “there appeared to be no way to retreat. But Tarasov decided to sell his life dearly” and fought on while prepared to die, but survived with wounds in both hands and bullets in both legs.<sup>78</sup> Expressed in statements such as “Comrade Battalion commissar, I will die, but I will do everything [you ordered],” fearlessness acted as a prerequisite for sacrificial defenders’ exploits.<sup>79</sup> A September editorial in *Krasnaia Zvezda* cited the exploit of a commander who killed an enemy soldier with his bare hands after being badly wounded, before concluding: “to be a hero of the patriotic war, courageously, do not spare blood or life itself.”<sup>80</sup> While some sacrificial defenders could survive through cunning or luck, they remained in a lesser tier of heroes compared to those who “gave their lives to the last breath to their motherland, to their people.”<sup>81</sup>

The overall portrayal of wounded soldiers in official rhetoric operated according to the same logic as that of dead heroes who exemplified the “sacrificial defender.” Such exploits reflected both the practical need for soldiers to keep fighting in order to slow the enemy advance and diminish the permanent loss of trained cadres and the symbolic value of who did not surrender or retreat despite hopeless circumstances. One hero profile even promised that a pilot who suffered multiple bullet wounds in combat “will dash back to battle with new strength against the hated enemy.”<sup>82</sup> The expectation that soldiers not allow wounds to keep them from the front also fit the “sacrificial defender” ideal that they were so devoted to national defense that they would die fighting, even if death did not come easily. Wounds, like death, were only a means to an end for heroes, and were not an achievement unless they brought greater destruction to the enemy. Both the greater and lesser forms of ideal combat action contrasted with the

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<sup>78</sup> “Fighter pilot Tarasov,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 4 September 1941, 2.

<sup>79</sup> “Battalion Commissar Peter Stafeev,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 18 July 1941, 2.

<sup>80</sup> “Junior commander, be a hero of the patriotic war,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 24 September 1941, 1.

<sup>81</sup> “The iron battalion of Major Kiselev,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 10 July 1941, 2.

<sup>82</sup> “Fighter Pilot Tarasov,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 4 September 1941, 2.

portrayal of harm befalling women in soldier specific propaganda. Wounded men demonstrated unlimited determination to fight, while women's wounds evoked pity and involved no honor. The "sacrificial defender" represented a distinctly masculine ideal of heroism, in which heroes made extreme decisions: they played an active, rather than passive role in driving out the enemy, sacrificed for the war effort, not just participated in it, and chose death, rather than suffering it as victims.

Few soldiers expressed a desire to pursue a sacrificial role in the war effort, or even thought it was necessary. An underlying and rarely stated implication of this "provider-at-war" masculinity was the belief that while death at the front was certainly possible, it was not a soldier's duty, contrary to the "sacrificial defender" ideal. Troops rarely considered the possibility of death in their letters, but often inverted their concern: "take care of yourself and our little boy. You both are so dear to me that losing you would make life meaningless."<sup>83</sup> Unambiguous expressions of worry hardly fit sacrificial defenders' active choice of death or believe that living was less important than victory. A father and husband succinctly expressed a contrary view three weeks into the war: "...death is not frightening, but why die when it is possible to destroy the enemy and remain alive."<sup>84</sup> Soldiers such as these understood the risks involved, but did not consider sacrifice to be something worth seeking out to speed the enemy's defeat. Having served since 1939, a former Siberian schoolteacher wrote his wife that "I will strike at the enemy to my last breath... but there is of course another option, that is victory in the full sense of the word, i.e. destroying the enemy and returning home to loved ones."<sup>85</sup>

Discussions of living to victory reflected the basic tension between the masculine duty presented

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<sup>83</sup> Letter of Aleksei G. Rogov to his wife, 11 August 1941. RGASPI M-33 Opis 1 Delo 456 List 1.

<sup>84</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 90 List 1.

<sup>85</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 439 List 1-2.



in official rhetoric and soldiers' duties to their female dependents, namely the incompatibility of sacrificial death with continuing to provide for ones' family.

Red Army fighters believed that their personal goals were compatible with national victory, just as they saw national defense as contributing to the defense of their families. Many expressed their hope to simply return home, as one soldier wrote to his mother from the Leningrad front: "every one of my shots at the damned fascists is a shot for our future happiness, for our future reunion."<sup>86</sup> For troops interested in the postwar future, it was clear that their duty to fight was only temporary, and their families remained their ultimate priority, as another promised to his wife: "we will smash the fascist reptiles and arrive home with victory."<sup>87</sup> The expectation to return home after victory was clearly incompatible with the notion that sacrificial death represented the height of masculine patriotism. Some soldiers seemed to hint at this, as Ukrainian rifleman, writing to his elderly father and sisters, explained: "I hope that with victory I will return to you and we will again live together... We will survive victory over the enemy and live once more."<sup>88</sup> While the duty to fight remained unquestioned, this soldier, and many like him, did not relish the chance to prove his patriotism with sacrifice. The "full sense" of victory was precisely what such soldiers fought for, a victory they lived to see.

Troops' perspectives on the glory of undertaking a heroic feat usually changed when they witnessed the suffering, limited care, and fate of wounded fellow soldiers. Eye-opening experiences sometimes greeted soldiers immediately upon arriving at the front, and bore no resemblance to what propaganda depicted. A tank trooper vividly recalled the scene that greeted him as his train arrived near the front: "They began to load wounded men onto our train as soon as we vacated it. We walked through the whole town. We were all shaken by what we saw. The

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<sup>86</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 94 List 6.

<sup>87</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1432-2 List 7.

<sup>88</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 420 List 2.

town had been frequently bombed, and it was under attack again. The wounded were everywhere, while corpses lay scattered in the streets.”<sup>89</sup> Other soldiers not only saw comrades wounded, but had to tend to them in absence of trained medics: “The wounded were moaning, while the uninjured were dragging the wreckage apart, carrying out the casualties. One man, white as chalk, had a broken arm. I began making a splint for him...”<sup>90</sup> Red Army fighters could find motivation to strike back at the enemy when comrades were wounded, but saw nothing to emulate directly: “Yesterday, my best friend was sent to the hospital, whom the fascists wounded in the neck. My hatred [of them] grows more and more.”<sup>91</sup> Fighting men subjected to battle quickly learned that few situations were likely to allow for choice and heroic outcomes at the risk of being wounded. They also saw wounded comrades die or fail to receive proper treatment, rather than accolades for their trouble.

When wounded, troops considered their suffering a sufficient sacrifice without worrying that they lacked dedication for having lived and allowed the enemy to do the same. Soldiers’ desire to direct concern away from themselves also shaped how they addressed wounds and the dangers they faced at the front. This approach also characterized many soldiers’ discussions of their wounds, some not even using the word: “I studied in the military school in the town of Sumy and was later sent to the front, and well, now I’ve clearly ended up in the hospital at Novocherkassk.”<sup>92</sup> While some echoed propaganda by emphasizing their present or future return to the front, a closer reading of soldiers’ discussions of other forms of danger suggests that their primary motive was downplaying the seriousness of a given threat. An artillery lieutenant mentioned the state of his correspondence with his wife as much as the imprisonment that caused

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<sup>89</sup> Vasilii Krysov, *Panzer Destroyer* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2010), 4.

<sup>90</sup> Obryn’va, 31.

<sup>91</sup> Letter of Iakov G. Usenko to his wife, 1 November 1941. RGASPI M-33 Opis 1 Delo 31 List 9.

<sup>92</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 715 List 3.

“my further interruption in communication with you. For two months and four days I was in a German prison, twice being arrested again and still escaping captivity. Now I am in the hamlet of Peska.”<sup>93</sup> In line with “provider-at-war” letter-writing tactics, these soldiers attempted to minimize the distress such stories might bring their loved ones by devoting more attention to their current, safe state than the life-threatening events that preceded it. Fitting this pattern, a rifleman who reported to his family that “the wound has almost healed, soon there will be an operation, and then again to the front,” gave no mention of battle or the nature of his wound before changing the subject.<sup>94</sup> Many soldiers mentioned being in implicitly dangerous situations, but were silent about the potential harm involved. In such cases, soldiers ignored the opportunity to discuss either the heroics or danger involved, which further distinguished their interpretation of wounds from that of propaganda.

Official rhetoric and soldiers’ responses to war involved different understandings of sacrifice in wartime. They varied not only in the extent of bodily harm considered a worthy contribution, but also in terms of the relationship between individual soldiers and the war effort. Soldier specific propaganda presented an ideal of soldierly masculinity premised on total subordination to the collective. If soldiers affiliated their sense of self with the national objective of victory, achieving that goal demanded that they fight, kill, and die. It also earned them awards and hero status, which surviving fighters lacked. The inability of women to play the same role and instead suffer from enemy action, according to official rhetoric, made men’s sacrifices more important still. Red Army men expressed a separate soldierly subjectivity rooted in individual connections to family and civilian life. This personal loyalty to family motivated them to fight and defend the country, but also compelled them to try to survive. Men’s letters reveal a dual

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<sup>93</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 331 List 4.

<sup>94</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 107.

concern with retaining their role in family life in the rear, as well as defending their families at the front. In their letter writing, as well as their service, they wished to spare wives, daughters, and mothers from the horrors of the front, but also the loss of loved ones in the fighting. Many saw their military role as a synthesis of personal and national goals, which motivated them to fight even if their sector of the front was far from home. Nevertheless, a soldierly subjectivity rooted in individual desires, even if patriotic, remained incompatible with the ideal of active death for the collective in official rhetoric.

### **Conclusion**

The immediate depiction of gendered front and rear spaces in the wartime Soviet Union suggested a continuation of prewar approaches to national defense generally, and in particular the continued promotion of the masculine ethic as a motive for military service. The readiness of PUR officials to depict passive, vulnerable women as the beneficiaries of young men's patriotic willingness to volunteer is significant as an indication of military officials' expectations for wartime mobilization. At the same time, civilian newspapers such as *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* presented an ambivalent set of ideas characterized as neither encouragement nor prohibition, and the head of the Komsomol, Nikolai Mikhailov, failed to specify military service as an option for patriotic men only.<sup>95</sup> However, their perspectives provided a poor indication of the attitudinal context in which Soviet women volunteers might find themselves serving in the coming year. The immediate and unequivocal presentation of a clear division between masculine front and feminine rear in *Krasnaia Zvezda* reflected the newspaper's approach to gender for the duration of the war, which few young men would pause to question in the coming months of desperate fighting.

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<sup>95</sup> Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 110-111.

Personal and local loyalties played a central role in motivating soldiers to fight, as Lisa Kirschenbaum has argued.<sup>96</sup> In the first months of the war, however, official rhetoric focused on pure calls for individual sacrifice and represented national defense as a collective duty. Focusing on soldiers' letters directly, unmediated by official screening or manipulation for publication, reveals that they expressed concern for their loved ones' well-being while fighting at the front in two different ways. Some troops fought to directly defend their family or home region from immediate danger, so that they directly served their personal interests at the front. Other troops connected the larger war effort of defending the motherland to their families' safety, even if they relied on the reciprocal service of other men separated from their homes by the exigencies of emergency mobilization. Significantly, these men's synthesis of common collective and individual interests in response to the invasion crisis predated comparable appeals in soldier specific propaganda. Red Army volunteers and called up reservists, still more citizen than soldier, drew little motivation from idealistic heroes in official rhetoric. Instead, they focused on their own interpretations of the invasion crisis, which saw military service as a means of keeping their homes intact and their families safe.

An examination of varied and elaborate exploits of sacrificial death presented official rhetoric might suggest an influential narrative that defined combat in the early months of the invasion.<sup>97</sup> However, an inquiry into soldiers' views of sacrifice and the cost of victory suggests that very few soldiers sought to emulate the "Sacrificial Defender" ideal directly. The more general relationship between such depictions of heroism and actual fighting tactics and expectations is not clear. While many Red Army fighters and indeed Red Armies found themselves in desperate circumstances in 1941, surrender proved far too common a choice for

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<sup>96</sup> Lisa Kirschenbaum, "Our City, Our Hearths, Our Families," *Slavic Review* Vol. 59, No. 4 (2000).

<sup>97</sup> Karel Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 62-65.

approximately three million servicemen for the “Sacrificial Defender” to have been a seriously influential ideal.<sup>98</sup> Soldiers’ letters reveal a cohort of servicemen who were fighting for their families’ safety and hoping to return to them in triumph. Those who raised the prospect of death as the price of victory at all did so to challenge it as the only option. While the propaganda narrative remained consistent during 1941, it failed to shape soldiers’ expectations, and certainly took fewer lives than the substantive errors Stalin and other Soviet leaders committed.

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<sup>98</sup> For estimates of Red Army POW losses see G.F. Krivosheev, ed. *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses* (London: Greenhill Books, 1997), 85.

CHAPTER 3  
HATING AND KILLING: DEFINING ONESELF AGAINST ENEMY AND NON-COMBATANT AMIDST  
DEFEAT, 1942

The Red Army's victory outside Moscow in December 1941 precipitated a number of substantial changes to the Soviet war effort in the New Year. The liberation of temporarily occupied territory around Moscow revealed enemy atrocities that fueled propaganda about the evil nature of enemy soldiers. Frontline propaganda paid increasing attention to women's role in the war effort, especially in the rear, as well as women's wartime suffering. Over 150 000 women entered the Red Army in 1942, though this scarcely increased their presence in front newspapers.<sup>1</sup> The relative stability of the frontline after the German defeat outside Moscow allowed the Red Army to bring its divisions up to strength and provided new soldiers with time to acclimate to front life and become familiar with their units. Red Army fortunes changed dramatically over the course of the year, which prompted propagandists and soldiers alike to shed many of their illusions about the nature and duration of the war. The year began with restored Soviet confidence, saw Red Army offensives fail while German forces conquered more territory in the summer, and then ended with new Red Army successes around Stalingrad. Amidst these changes in 1942, three topics persisted in official rhetoric and soldiers' views: the enemy, violence, and comradeship.

The act of killing focused constructions of gender amidst these issues, thanks to the unambiguous juxtaposition of men and women in relation to the motives, means, and manifestations of wartime violence. Unlike the Hitlerite hordes of 1941, the enemy appeared in frontline propaganda as a group of individual men in 1942. Articles focused on the character and psychology of those men, and the bestial masculinity evident in Germans' treatment of Soviet

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 299.

women provided a key point of contrast with Red Army soldiers' behavior. Carrying out violence against the enemy not only fell to Red Army men according to frontline propaganda, but required their distinctive qualities and spirit, rather than skills alone. In contrast, both official and soldierly discussions of women and violence focused on their victimization. Soviet women functioned otherwise as helpers, whether building weapons in the rear or providing first aid near the front. Soldiers who continued to fight at the front began to express masculine subjectivities oriented away from families in the rear and toward the frontline comrades with whom they shared the danger and hardship of everyday life. The frontline comradeship that developed among soldiers quickly assumed an exclusive character, which distinguished combatants from female auxiliaries and feminized rear service men.

This chapter argues that critical changes to soldiers' subjectivities and frontline propaganda took place during the period between victory outside Moscow and victory at Stalingrad. Official rhetoric demonstrated its responsiveness to wartime changes, even if leaders and propagandists reacted more to strategic developments than to the needs and views of the Red Army rank and file. Propaganda messages continued to include adapted prewar ideas and new ideals of soldierly conduct, which remained anchored in masculine values and priorities. The masculine subjectivity of men at the front underwent a fundamental shift from affiliation with family and home to affiliation with comrades and front as time and circumstances made the former more distant and more difficult to imagine. Hatred and especially violence drove these developments, and established much of the cultural framework for the rest of the war. The new focus on killing the enemy distinguished the second year of the war as a foundational period of masculine frontline culture. At the same time, the combat collective emerged as source of affiliation separate from the national collective or soldiers' families.



### **The enemy as masculine other**

Once frontline propaganda began to consistently represent the German enemy in 1942, it produced a new figure, unlike earlier combatants or the various enemies of the 1930s. Propagandists no longer sought to present a worthy foe as they had with Japanese or Finnish enemies during the border war period, but an antithetical masculine other, who challenged the Red Army hero's honor and ethics through his attacks on Soviet women and civilians.<sup>2</sup> The German enemy appeared in a battle between good and evil, not simply a battlefield struggle of strength and tenacity.

Enemy atrocities began to feature prominently in *Krasnaia Zvezda* from the first days of the year based on the reports of soldiers advancing into occupied territory and "preliminary information" from areas further behind enemy lines. In early January, a front-page editorial entitled "A Pack of Murderers and Robbers" elaborated on the scale and variety of "heinous acts of violence" the enemy had perpetrated in occupied territory, including the numbers of dead in different regions and the methods involved. The editorial highlighted "women, girls, and schoolchildren" as victims and explained that the atrocities took place due to the "unleashing...of the most base, animal instincts among [enemy] officers and soldiers."<sup>3</sup> Such reports continued to appear in *Krasnaia Zvezda* throughout the winter, including a multi-panel illustration of the hanging of Soviet civilians on February 6.<sup>4</sup> Neither Hitler nor fascist ideology received more than a passing mention, if any, in the condemnation that accompanied these reports.

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<sup>2</sup> On the portrayal of the enemy in the border war period, see Karen Petrone, "Masculinity and Heroism in Imperial and Soviet Military-Patriotic Cultures," in *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, ed. Barbara Evans Clements et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> "A Pack of Murderers and Robbers," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 8 January 1942, 1

<sup>4</sup> "We will not forget these gallows. We will not forget and not forgive!" *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 6 February 1942, 3.

Instead, the German rank-and-file soldiers and frontline officers appeared as the central perpetrators in a consistent definition of a single enemy type. In some articles, the scale of the killings received the most emphasis, such as the murder of hundreds of hospital patients, but the most common approach was to recount the most horrific atrocities in detail.<sup>5</sup> An article about torture victims described, corpse by corpse, how German soldiers had “broken a jaw, pulled out fingernails... disfigured a face with a bayonet” and “burned genitals with a hot iron.”<sup>6</sup> Six weeks later, another article detailed how a victim of the Germans had been found: “eyes gouged out and scorched, nose broken, covered in bruises from rifle butts. Hands cut off and wounds scorched with red-hot irons.”<sup>7</sup> Such articles made clear that the enemy pursued violence outside the normal bounds of the conventional soldier, which suggested he would not surrender or obey the rules of war or accepted military conduct. Above all, he lacked honor.

While such portrayals of the enemy as a torturer and murderer provided an unambiguous impression, other articles elaborated on what motivated him to wage war and conquer. In an article titled simply, “On Hatred,” celebrated Soviet writer Ilia Ehrenburg explained the psychology of the enemy:

Spite drives every soldier of Fascism... One German lance corporal wrote in his diary that torture ‘cheers and even excites’ him... The naïve ones thought that there were people marching against us, but against us marched monsters who had selected the skull as their emblem, young and shameless robbers, vandals who were thirsting to destroy everything in their path.<sup>8</sup>

Rather than traditional notions of honor or national duty, destruction and violence drove the enemy to fight. Ehrenburg went on to explain that it was the enemy’s perpetration of atrocities during the invasion, rather than killing on the battlefield, which made them barbarians:

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<sup>5</sup> “The Germans killed 530 patients,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 25 January 1942, 2.

<sup>6</sup> New facts of German atrocities against Red Army prisoners,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 11 March 1942, 3.

<sup>7</sup> “A savage massacre of wounded soldiers,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 29 April 1942, 3.

<sup>8</sup> “On Hatred,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 2 May 1942, 4.

Above all, they brought death with them to our land. *I do not speak of the death of soldiers*: there is no war without victims. I speak of the gallows on which Russian girls swing, of the terrible ditch near Kerch where the children of Russians, Tatars, and Jews were buried. I speak of how the Hitlerites finish off our wounded and burn down our peasants' homes.<sup>9</sup>

Descriptions of the enemy as “monsters” and “vandals” were part of a consistent set of terms that emphasized his sadistic use of violence in war, which separated him from the soldiers of the Red Army. In line with the overall portrayal of the enemy in *Krasnaia Zvezda*, Ehrenburg articulated the belief that the objects of the enemy's violence, and the reasons for that violence, distinguished and diminished him as a soldier and as a man.

What fully set apart and vilified the German soldier in Red Army propaganda, and further marks Ehrenburg's portrayal as that of an enemy soldierly masculinity, is his behavior towards women and children. Articles about such crimes emphasized the exceptional nature of enemy brutality, which was evident in the concluding words attributed to a woman who recounted her survival of a mass shooting of civilians: “Where can I find words to curse that band of killers, those cannibals, drinking the blood of women and children[?]”.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, *Krasnaia Zvezda* articles described atrocities against women and children in horrific detail: “one soldier smashed the child's head before his mother's eyes and cut him in half. Then the fascist beasts tore off the sobbing mother's clothes, and raped the woman and killed her.”<sup>11</sup> Beyond the similarities with other atrocity reports, the threat German soldiers posed to Soviet women had further implications for the presentation of the enemy in Red Army propaganda.

*Krasnaia Zvezda* explained to Red Army troops that such merciless crimes against women revealed something essential about the enemy's character. An editorial on April 10, “For

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<sup>9</sup> Emphasis added. Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> The terms “*kannibal*” and “*liudoed*” both appear in descriptions of the enemy, without any apparent difference in meaning. “We will take revenge on the fascists!” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 17 January 1942, 3.

<sup>11</sup> “Simferopol, Yalta, Eupatoria,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 7 April 1942, 3.

the honor of our women!” named several women found raped and killed by the enemy before elaborating on the larger ramifications of such behavior: “German fascists, brazenly mocking the honor of Soviet women – these are lustful animals.” Beyond the obvious love of destruction and violence evident in their behavior, the motive of lust reinforced portrayals of the enemy as driven by savage, but human impulses. The editorial emphasized that the enemy’s actions were not the result of wartime circumstances, but had deep roots: “They have defiled their youth in German brothels and made the customs of brothels the catechism of their behavior in occupied countries.” The editorial continued to emphasize how the enemy’s lustful behavior and rape of women, rather than the torture of other civilians generally, was definitively the behavior of savage men: “they have no shame, no remorse, [and] no heart. In the village of Semenov in Kalinin oblast Hitlerites raped 25-year-old Olga Tikhonova, the pregnant wife of a Red Army soldier.” Young German men with lustful and violent “animal instincts” were therefore the typical enemy type to appear in propaganda.<sup>12</sup> Such depictions helped strengthen the contrast with Red Army soldiers’ rational nature and ethical defense of their homeland.

The propaganda effort to characterize the German invader as a savagely masculine figure also explained how heroic Red Army soldiers should respond. They were to hate the enemy, but fight differently than him, and of course treat women in an entirely different manner. Inspiring hatred would help motivate soldiers, according to Stalin in his May Day speech:

A change has also taken place in the ranks of the Red Army. Complacency and laxity regarding the enemy, which was evident among the troops in the first months of the war, have disappeared. The atrocities, pillage, and violence perpetrated by the German fascist invaders against the peaceful population and Soviet POWs have cured our men of this disease. ... They have learned to hate the German fascist invaders.

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<sup>12</sup> “For the honor of our women!” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 10 April 1942, 1.

This newfound hatred would inspire soldiers to defeat the enemy, because “one cannot defeat the enemy without learning to hate him with every fiber of one’s soul.”<sup>13</sup> Hatred did not mean Soviet troops should themselves become like the enemy. Their task was to kill only the enemy, rather than massacre prisoners and ravage civilians: “acre by acre, town by town we are cleansing our land of the rapists. There is no greater exploit.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Red Army soldiers aimed to protect women from the licentious enemy: “The honor of women, sisters, mothers, daughters – what is more valuable for a man, a defender of his motherland, of his family?”<sup>15</sup> While connections between victims of the German invader and soldiers’ families were rare, the invocation of a man’s defense of women’s honor revealed an unambiguous distinction between Soviet citizens’ relationship with violence, and the masculine nature of national defense.

When predictions of complete victory by year’s end met no concrete results and instead German forces began to drive deeper into Soviet territory, the valence of the idea of the enemy changed, and so did the depiction of the soldier hero. Propaganda continued to present the enemy as a brutal killer, but a much more dangerous one, who threatened the very existence of the Soviet people. Stalin used this approach when he mentioned that the enemy would shoot civilians if partisans prevented “some German beast... from raping women or robbing citizens” in his October Revolution anniversary speech.<sup>16</sup> Discussions of such enemy villainy sought to inspire soldiers’ hatred and will to resist, as the head of the Red Army’s Political Administration, A.S. Shcherbakov told a meeting of Kalinin Front political workers. Front newspapers, he explained, should publish more material like, “for example, the letter of a girl from Kel’n, which

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<sup>13</sup> A large portrait of Stalin in a military tunic and cap accompanied the order, occupying the place of the editorial “Order of the People’s Commissar of Defense No. 130,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 1 May 1942, 1.

<sup>14</sup> “Death and Immortality,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 31 January 1942, 3.

<sup>15</sup> The article uses the unambiguous “muzhchina,” rather than “chelovek.” “For the honor of our women!” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 10 April 1942, 1.

<sup>16</sup> J. V. Stalin, *O Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voine Sovetskogo Soiuza* [On the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union] (St. Petersburg: Piter, 2010), 67.

shows how our people have become slaves.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, newspaper articles explained to soldiers directly that in response to the enemy’s invasion “there can only be one answer: death or victory!” because death could allow “fascist bandits...to make your wives and children into slaves.”<sup>18</sup> Despite women’s actual contributions at the front, it was their place in the rear to be defended and their victimization under occupation that appeared in soldier-specific propaganda most frequently.

Soldier specific propaganda explicitly stated the significance of German atrocities against Soviet women for Red Army troops, as if to ensure political workers and soldiers understood this was a failure of their duty as defenders of the motherland. An article reporting Soviet women’s activism surrounding children in the war reminded soldiers of women’s role in child rearing: “Be resolute in the war – happiness will again return to our children. The Red Army is carrying it [back to you] ...your husbands, brothers, [and] sons are fighting against the enemy!”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, at year’s end, the article “The Return” presented a family desperately awaiting the Red Army’s return to their German-occupied village: “The German is evil. He hunted Mother and hunted us. [My] aunt says to me: ‘recite the poems about Voroshilov.’ But I did not recite them – lest the German overhear, he would kill me and Grandmother.”<sup>20</sup> Both articles presented soldiers with the stakes of failing to uphold the masculine ethic of national defense. This newly prominent depiction of the enemy, as an object of hate that preyed on defenseless civilians and prisoners, and defiled Soviet women, began to appear in Soviet propaganda in the first days of 1942, and remained prominent throughout the year.<sup>21</sup> As an antithetical masculine figure, it also

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<sup>17</sup> RGASPI Fond 88 Opis 1 Delo 951, List 6.

<sup>18</sup> “Not a step back!” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 24 September 1942, 2.

<sup>19</sup> “Meeting in defense of children from fascist barbarism,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 21 April 1942, 2.

<sup>20</sup> “The return,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 27 December 1942, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Those soldiers who surrendered ceased to be Red Army soldiers, both in law under Stalin’s Order 270 from August 1941 and in official rhetoric, which presented them separately from those who died in battle.

provided the foundation for defining the ideal Red Army hero in propaganda, even as the latter changed in step with the strategic situation. Although life and death prevailed over honor as a concern, women's need for rescue and protection appeared as a central theme. Red Army troops could prevent the enemy from unleashing his violent passions on Soviet civilians, and had countless examples of the consequences of failure.

Amidst the new focus on the enemy in propaganda, male soldiers, writing to an overwhelmingly female audience of relatives, wives, and girlfriends, continued to perform the "provider-at-war" masculinity in their letters home. Red Army troops' focus on family and personal ties continued to shape their expressions of hatred for the enemy in early 1942, rather than prompting soldiers to adopt propaganda language directly. Many troops cursed the enemy simply for disrupting their lives, as one junior officer explained, "At the enemy that has broken our happy life, I strike mercilessly, to destroy every one of them."<sup>22</sup> Some troops expressed their duty to contribute to the enemy's defeat, but nonetheless presented returning home as their ultimate priority. A recon squad leader on the Kalinin Front explained this to his wife and daughter: "the duty of every soldier should be to destroy the German oppressor in order to return home with victory."<sup>23</sup> A lieutenant reassured his wife in Baku in a similar manner: "don't worry, everything will be alright. ...be fully confident that I will return home only as a hero who destroyed the [fascist] reptiles."<sup>24</sup> Another soldier, lamenting that he had not yet seen his newborn son, wrote to his wife: "If it weren't for these Hitlerite dogs, we would be enjoying our

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<sup>22</sup> Personal motives appeared even in such public letters, intended for family but sent via a state radio service for soldiers who could not reach family members at peacetime addresses. GARF Fond 6903 Opis 9 Delo 142 List 161.

<sup>23</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 48 List 1.

<sup>24</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 779 List 9-10.

life together.”<sup>25</sup> For many such men, separation from family was enough reason to hate the enemy.

Some cited the potential threat to their loved ones as reason to hate the enemy, as a soldier from still-unoccupied parts of the Rostov oblast vowed to his wife: “I will strike so strongly at the enemy and give them no mercy...so that our children would live as you lived and not be slaves.”<sup>26</sup> Many others in the Red Army were less fortunate, and cursed an enemy that had already occupied their towns and endangered their families directly. A small group of soldiers from the Crimea wrote to their families via the state radio service: “We are fighting the German barbarians and will liberate our Crimean homeland.”<sup>27</sup> Taken together, these letters suggest the continued importance of personal motives and a duty to family for frontline soldiers in early 1942. The German invader threatened male soldiers’ real and symbolic status as defenders of the families, but suffering or fearing a personal loss due to the invasion was more likely than propaganda to prompt soldiers to express hatred of the enemy.

Expressions of hatred and anger appeared most frequently among fighting men who witnessed enemy atrocities against women firsthand. An artilleryman, who rarely encountered the enemy at a close enough distance to distinguish between individual faces, explained his hatred in this manner: “One could not but hate the invaders for the ‘scorched earth’ that I saw in the region between the Volga and Don rivers... and for the gallows they set up in a village near Rostov-on-Don, where the bodies of five hanged civilians swung in the winter wind.”<sup>28</sup> Without such experiences, men writing to their families were less likely to have a personal reason to hate the enemy, and soldiers did not seem to need to hate the enemy to function in battle. A tanker

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<sup>25</sup> Mikhail Stepanovich Budnov. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 254 List 11.

<sup>26</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1413/2 List 1.

<sup>27</sup> GARF Fond 6903 Opis 9 Delo 211 List 70.

<sup>28</sup> Isaak Kobylanskiy, *From Stalingrad to Pillau* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 239.



explained how battle alone did not provoke hatred: “here it was a simple matter: either you would get him, or he would get you. I would never shoot prisoners, though. ... I ruled it out as a matter of principle.”<sup>29</sup> Until personal loss or experiences of enemy violence inspired them, soldiers’ rarely expressed anything like the intense hatred that propaganda, and particularly Il’ia Ehrenburg’s articles, promoted regularly in 1942.

The focus on hatred of the enemy that emerged in soldier-specific propaganda in 1942 followed the discovery of mass atrocities in liberated regions. The same pattern seemed to operate in individual expressions of hatred against the Germans, whether contemporary or remembered decades later. Violence distinguished enemy and hero, not only as opposing forces, but as fundamentally different men, with women as passive figures caught in between. As a mobilizing tool, official rhetoric emphasized the suffering of women and children, Germans’ animalistic nature, including sexual urges, and the defense of women’s honor as recurring theme tied to the masculine ethic. While retaining the basic divide between front and rear, active and passive used in 1941, the new emphasis on enemy violence appeared as a stronger challenge to Soviet men, just as Civil War veterans challenged their figurative sons to do better. Red Army troops appeared less engaged with official rhetoric than they had been in 1941, and instead let their experiences determine their views. Still strongly oriented toward family, especially in the first months of the year, servicemen showed little concern for Germans’ violation of general ideals of honorable warfare. Only after soldiers grew more accustomed to frontline life and especially combat would they contrast themselves as soldiers.

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<sup>29</sup> Vasilii Krysov, *Panzer Destroyer* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword. 2010), 90.

## **Violence as distinguishing action in war**

As the Red Army prepared to expel the German invader in 1942, the violence and aggression of offensive operations gained greater attention at all levels of the military. Official rhetoric promoted the motives and means for maximum German casualties as a labor-like endeavor, which would aggregate enough enemy losses into Soviet victory. Soldiers proved much more contemplative, and considered how the act of killing changed them and their sense of self. Killing the enemy thus varied from job requirement to rite of passage, but the desire and capacity to be violent assumed a masculine character. As women began to arrive at the front in numbers, both propagandists and soldiers began to re-categorize frontline service roles hierarchically according to their exposure to, and use of violence.

A new hero emerged to reflect the focus on using violence differently from the enemy, and his motives, qualities, and combat exploits marked a departure from the “Sacrificial Defender” of 1941. In his place, propagandists and political workers sought to connect the male soldier of 1942 with the New Soviet Man and masculine labor heroes of the 1930s.<sup>30</sup> This new ideal, the “Stakhanovite-at-arms,” strove to exterminate the hated enemy by engaging his fellow soldiers in socialist competition. Frontline propaganda presented such competitions as an easy task befitting the optimistic tone of the period. Official rhetoric promoted a high number of enemies killed as the measure of a hero, rather than the bravery or risk-taking otherwise involved in successful battler performance. The difference in who and how he killed further defined the “Stakhanovite-at-arms” through contrast with the enemy, as the former only struck down other men, did so skillfully, and killed with a calm, detached demeanor, despite his hatred. The act of

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<sup>30</sup> On the highly gendered rhetoric of 1930s industrialization, see Thomas G. Schrand, “Socialism in One Gender: Masculine Values in the Stalin Revolution,” in *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, ed. Barbara Evans Clements et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

killing also distinguished the heroic Red Army men as the foremost contributors to the Soviet war effort, elevating them above the women who supported them at the front and in the rear.

Socialist competition quickly became a central element of political work among Red Army soldiers in 1942. On January 20, a report about Komsomol work in the military, one of the first efforts to promote the new movement, demanded that “the expansion of competition among fighters in the destruction of fascist troops. There is too little fury [at present]. ...Political work is needed to support this competition.”<sup>31</sup> In February, Andrei Zhdanov, chief Party representative on the Leningrad Front, systematically elaborated the new agenda of political work to a meeting of decorated soldiers and political workers. From the outset, he explained that military success was only one objective:

Comrades, our front rally of brave destroyers of the fascist occupiers has a great significance not only practically, but also politically, not only significance for our front, but also for all of our Red Army...Comrades, it is not surprising, therefore, that the movement of exterminators...was launched by our leader and commander comrade Stalin.<sup>32</sup>

Zhdanov’s speech therefore addressed larger plans within the Red Army for political work to present a new definition of heroism and a new measure of achievement for soldiers that restored the political content largely absent from the “Sacrificial Defender” of 1941.

The political significance that Zhdanov mentioned was the application of the methods and revival of the rhetoric of the mobilization efforts of the 1930s, which helped define the new heroic ideal by linking him to a central example of the New Soviet Man in the second half of the 1930s, the Stakhanovite hero of labor.<sup>33</sup> Zhdanov deliberately employed the language of

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<sup>31</sup> RGASPI Fond 77 Opis 1 Delo 936 List 8.

<sup>32</sup> RGASPI Fond 77 Opis 1 Delo 938 List 4.

<sup>33</sup> Toby Clark, “The ‘new man’s’ body: a motif in early Soviet culture,” in *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State*, ed. Matthew Cullerne Bown et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 43. See also, Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the politics of productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), chapter 6.

socialist competition and Stakhanovism to explain the heroism that political workers should promote: “the *Komsomoltsy* of a single division decided to begin socialist competition between units in the extermination of the fascist reptiles...there are many similarities with the Stakhanovite movement, and I would call our exterminating soldiers Stakhanovites on the military front.”<sup>34</sup> Such heroes’ skills and optimistic belief in victory were to overcome the unfavorable military realities that prevailed at the front in 1942, just as Stakhanovites’ strength and will-power overcame the empirical limits of production.<sup>35</sup> Socialist competition to exterminate the hated enemy, inspired by Stalin, motivated the new hero, and the number of enemy dead he produced demonstrated his merit.<sup>36</sup>

After the Germans launched a massive offensive in June, a new soldierly ideal in propaganda developed from deteriorating military situation that culminated in the battle for Stalingrad. Facing a new threat from the same enemy, the “Last Soviet Man” fought out of desperation, killing to keep his country from being overrun, rather than as part of the march to impending victory. A notion of young men’s generational duty helped define the new hero, in which “sons” had to defend the victory of their fathers and the gains of the Revolution. In battle, the “Last Soviet Man” remained disciplined without resorting to sacrificial actions, and yet he refused to retreat under pressure. Instead, he fought on and stayed alive because his will was greater than that of enemy.

As the Red Army suffered heavy losses on all fronts, and faced rapid enemy advances in the south, soldier-specific propaganda and political work began to present a new ideal connected to the strategic situation and yet consistently gendered masculine. Speaking to agitators on the Voronezh Front in September, formed after the German summer offensive began, Army

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<sup>34</sup> RGASPI Fond 77 Opis 1 Delo 938 List 5.

<sup>35</sup> Clark, 44.

<sup>36</sup> RGASPI Fond 77 Opis 1 Delo 938 List 4.

Commissar Lev Mekhlis focused on the stakes of the battles about to unfold while explaining what motivated the “Last Soviet Man”:

We are talking about – whether or not the great Russian people will be in slavery, and all peoples of our country, who on the field of battle have bloodily linked their fate with the fate of the great Russian people... We are talking about – Comrade Stalin has highlighted this – whether or not there will be Soviet power... The issue is the national and social enslavement of our country.<sup>37</sup>

The existential threat to the Soviet people and the Soviet system operated as the basic motivation of the new hero, and reflected desperation totally absent from the “Stakhanovite-at-arms” ideal soldier that preceded him. From such simple motives, the duty of this new hero was clear, as a *Krasnaia Zvezda* editorial explained to soldiers: “The Soviet people demand that the Red Army staunchly defend every scrap of native territory... every Soviet city and town – that is our duty, the sacred requirement of every fighter of the Red Army.”<sup>38</sup> In an October speech to senior political workers on the Volkhov Front, Mekhlis explained how his motives gave the “Last Soviet Man” the moral strength to triumph over the enemy: “Our army, led by the great military leader, Comrade Stalin, fighting for a just cause, defending its own homes - has every reason to exceed the enemy in its fighting spirit.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, propaganda ascribed only villainous motives to the enemy, as one editorial explained: “Piles of ash and stones remain in the locations of flourishing towns and villages, where the German has been. Everything that he can destroy, the German destroys.”<sup>40</sup>

Generational distinctions further differentiated the “Last Soviet Man” from previous soldierly masculinities in official rhetoric. Such soldiers had a duty as defender not only to defend Soviet women, but also as “sons of October,” to defend the Revolution their fathers had

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<sup>37</sup> RGASPI Fond 386 Opis 1 Delo 14 List 26-27.

<sup>38</sup> “Staunchly defend every population center,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 13 September 1942, 1.

<sup>39</sup> RGASPI Fond 386 Opis 1 Delo 15 List 20.

<sup>40</sup> “Hordes of professionals smashed,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 17 November 1941, 1.

won and thus prove their manliness.<sup>41</sup> On August 4, a *Krasnaia Zvezda* article presented the oath of a group of Don Cossacks, who, “death threatening our children, our wives...Vow on the honor and blessed memory of our fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers...to destroy mercilessly the hated enemy.”<sup>42</sup> In September, another such article invoked the duty of the younger generation of men to act as defenders, this time unfavorably comparing Volga civil war battles to those of 1942: “when under the ruins of our homes our wives and children perish, we, the defenders of Tsaritsyn, decided to contact you, defenders of Stalingrad.”<sup>43</sup> To mark the anniversary of the Revolution, editorials reinforced the message of inter-generational male contrast and obligation, “In October of 1917 our fathers and brothers went into battle against the forces of slavery and oppression...in battles with the hated German invaders we defend the gains of October.”<sup>44</sup>

The language of family in official rhetoric consistently presented the duty of soldier heroes as a generational one, and thus reflected the pessimistic tone in propaganda, raising the prospect of total defeat and the loss of a generation’s worth of progress under Soviet power. This possibility never received such frequent and honest attention at any other time of the war, including the months when German armies neared Moscow in 1941. Moreover, as part of the break with the previous heroic ideal, soldier heroes of the “Last Soviet Man” type no longer appeared in propaganda as the figurative heirs of 1930s Stakhanovites, but of the inaugural cohort of Red Army fighters from the Civil War of the late 1910s.

The combat exploits of the “Last Soviet Man” also diverged from those of the heroic ideal that preceded him, and continued to contrast with portrayals of the enemy’s use of violence.

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<sup>41</sup> “The oath of frontline soldiers,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 11 November 1942, 3.

<sup>42</sup> “On the honor and memory of our fathers we vow to defend the quiet Don!” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 4 August 1942, 3.

<sup>43</sup> “Defend Stalingrad at any price!” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 27 September 1942, 2.

<sup>44</sup> “We are cleansing the Soviet land of German invaders,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 3 November 1942, 1.

Red Army soldiers became heroes not by accumulating a high number of enemies killed, but by overcoming larger forces through whatever means necessary, fueled by greater will and hatred. A lieutenant in “One against ten” demonstrated the power of hatred: “he was wounded, but his hatred of the enemy gave him strength. He pushed the German off him and, grabbing him by the throat, strangled him.”<sup>45</sup> Killing the last of ten Germans with his bare hands, the Lieutenant highlighted the importance of continuing to fight, rather than panicking or retreating, not only to display heroism, but also to survive, as the Lieutenant’s actions helped his unit escape encirclement and continue fighting. Echoing Order 227, the article “Not a step back!” emphasized this: “Four fearless Soviet guards, Belikov, Aleinikov, Boloto and Samoilev drove back the attack of 30 enemy tanks, destroying 15, and they themselves remained alive. Staunchness conquers death.”<sup>46</sup> Rather than skills or kills, or sacrifice against superior enemy numbers, soldiers who were so driven to destroy the enemy that they would not retreat, panic, or even die appeared as the true heroes. An editorial quoted General Suvorov to reiterate this point: “death runs from the swords and bayonets of the brave, happiness crowns boldness and courage.”<sup>47</sup> In this way, the “Last Soviet Man” defended Soviet women, and used violence against a (semi-) challenging opponent, for more honorable purposes, and with greater skill than the German enemy opposing him.

Remarkably, only two articles in *Krasnaia Zvezda* discussed a woman combatant in the Red Army in the first half of 1942. The first discussed her service as a frontline soldier, but never described her as killing or exterminating the enemy. Scout Mariia Baida, posthumously decorated as a Hero of the Soviet Union, saw enemies “fall to the ground” while she “directed her submachine gun in their direction,” but her male officer did the only specified killing in the

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<sup>45</sup> “One against ten,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 18 September 1942, 2.

<sup>46</sup> “Not a step back!” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 24 September 1942, 3.

<sup>47</sup> “Blow for blow,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 29 November 1942, 1.

battle account.<sup>48</sup> Given the unambiguous and often graphic language used to describe the violence men perpetrated against each other, such restraint suggests a deliberate effort to retain the role of enemy-killer as the exclusive role of male soldiers, with the “Stakhanovite-at-arms” as the best killers among them. The second contained active violence against the enemy, but diminished Nina Onilova’s combat merit and still portrayed her differently than male heroes. While fighting the enemy, “a fragment of a German shell wounded the girl in the temple. Blood flooded her face, and her head impotently fell to the ground. She lost consciousness, but only for a short while... Her comrades carried the woman machine-gunner to the field hospital.”<sup>49</sup> Not only did she not fight for the prevailing motive of socialist competition, her portrayal focused excessively on a severe wound. Onilova’s subsequent death, which the article linked to other fallen women, situated her as a tragic feminine figure more like the martyr Zoia Kosmodemianskaia than the “Stakhanovite-at-arms” or even the “Sacrificial Defender” of 1941. These portrayals represent a Soviet variation on the larger pattern of depicting women warriors with disqualifying flaws of excessively feminine qualities or insufficient warrior qualities or accomplishments.<sup>50</sup> Both women fell short, the first for failing to actually kill in battle, and the second for her feminine vulnerability and insufficient will to continue fighting while wounded.

Frontline propaganda typically presented non-combatant women, rather than tainted fighters like Baida and Onilova, and explained what kept them from taking sustained violent action against the enemy. The most basic problems, according to official rhetoric, were women’s lack of the mental and physical strength required for combat. Formal inquiries based on the latter assumption challenged a female medic’s decoration with the Order of Lenin for

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<sup>48</sup> “Scout Mariia Baida,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 27 June 1942, 2.

<sup>49</sup> “Heroines of Sevastopol’s Defense,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 8 March 1942, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Sharon Macdonald, “Drawing the lines – gender, peace, and war: An Introduction” in *Images of Women in War and Peace*, ed. Sharon Macdonald et al. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 7.



pulling wounded men from combat. The investigation occurred because officials were convinced that the medic, Olga Brazhnik, “was not capable of carrying even a fraction of [the stated number] of wounded soldiers from the field of battle.”<sup>51</sup> Given such weakness, a mother could “send to war the best and strongest part of her soul – [her] son. Let him fight for the two of them, for her too, with twice the strength, twice the hatred.”<sup>52</sup> As if these deficits were not enough, most women lacked the motives and nature that drove men to fight, and were therefore best suited to other tasks. A mother lamented “my children, I become weak, I have no strength left.”<sup>53</sup> Better to produce soldiers and aid them from the rear, as the Central Committee’s International Women’s Day resolution explained. Women could provide first aid, give blood, or care for orphans as laudable displays of feminine patriotism, which minimized their exposure to the violence and danger of the front.<sup>54</sup>

After the tone of soldier-specific propaganda changed in August, portrayals of women at the front declined, and those that appeared still failed to discuss women killing the enemy. In contrast, articles such as “A Mother’s Order,” “Women of the Town of Ivanovo,” and “Soldiers’ Wives” appeared more frequently, and focused on home front roles in considerable detail.<sup>55</sup> When women did appear at the front, as in the editorial “Glory to men and women partisans!”, only male partisans received individual recognition for their heroism in killing the enemy.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the obituary of Aviator Marina Raskova credited her for civilian flights and training of

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<sup>51</sup> Report of the Inspector General of the Cavalry of the Red Army, Gorkovidov, 30 October 1942. RGASPI Fond 83 Opis 1 Delo 19 List 22.

<sup>52</sup> “Mother,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 10 March 1942, 3.

<sup>53</sup> “Our grey mothers,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 30 April 1942, 3.

<sup>54</sup> International Women’s Day Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. RGASPI Fond 17 Opis 125 Delo 105 List 13.

<sup>55</sup> “A Mother’s Order,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 10 September 1942, 3; “Women of the Town of Ivanovo,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 24 September 1942, 4; “Soldiers’ Wives,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 12 December 1942, 3.

<sup>56</sup> The article noted the exploits of six partisans by name, all of them men. “Glory to men and women partisans!” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 14 November 1942, 1.

women pilots, but never mentioned that she or her pupils had killed the enemy.<sup>57</sup> While women did appear in propaganda as contributors to the war effort, they failed to engage in violent acts against the enemy that constituted the foremost contribution to the war effort.

In response to presentations of exterminator-heroes and kill tally exploits, letters from Red Army troops expressed a remarkable lack of enthusiasm about the act of killing as part of their duty as soldiers. While some fighters adopted the language of killing and exterminating enemy soldiers, making proclamations such as “I can already note a tally of 21 exterminated white Finns,” they more commonly failed to mention it at all.<sup>58</sup> This likely reflected the fact that Soviet military failures throughout the winter and spring provided few opportunities for troops to match official rhetoric and exterminate the enemy in large numbers.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps the most compelling reason that soldiers failed to embrace the socialist competition in killing promoted in official rhetoric was their actual experience of combat at the front. As one *politruk* wrote to his wife, hoping to discourage his son from volunteering: “at the front, romance and poetry are much less [evident] than hardships and even horror. War is war. It is full of death, wounds, and other terrors.”<sup>60</sup> Such sobering thoughts of combat hardly fit with propaganda constructs of a passive enemy and comparisons with coal hewing.

For many Red Army men, killing remained a basic and inevitable part of warfare, part of the duty they had to perform to end the war and return home. One soldier explained this view matter-of-factly: “If you don’t kill the German, he kills you.”<sup>61</sup> Others did not accept the new

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<sup>57</sup> “In memoriam of the Hero of the Soviet Union Marina Raskova,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 9 January 1943, 3.

<sup>58</sup> “я уже пишу на счету истребленных 21 бело-фина.” RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 445 List 2.

<sup>59</sup> Soviet losses for 1942 exceeded half a million soldiers by March, and totaled more than three quarters of a millions by June. Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 147.

<sup>60</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 92 List 7.

<sup>61</sup> Multi-soldier file, here Mikhail S. Budnov. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 254 List 12.

measure of a fighting man, and understood the exterminator-hero as one role among many. Signaler Aleksandr Myl'nikov explained this to his brother: "I have not managed to finish off a single German because I am not a rifleman, nor a machine-gunner, nor an artilleryman, but a radio operator and such opportunities have not yet arisen...and I carry out my orders pretty well."<sup>62</sup> While Myl'nikov addressed the significance of personally killing the enemy, he expressed an alternative pride in his specialization, which lay outside the bounds of socialist competition and the sniper-centered heroic ideal. Such responses amidst a general silence about the specific act of killing demonstrate the limitations of the new heroic ideal, the "Stakhanovite-at-arms," to resonate amidst soldiers who otherwise shared some of the hatred of the enemy present in official rhetoric.

Instead, soldiers continued to focus on their families, and their motives to fight and kill remained tied to a sense of masculine duty to defend the country while performing their peacetime role and care for their female and elderly relatives, as the "Provider-at-war." Minimizing concern for their own safety, usually by focusing on their family's well-being in the rear and omitting any discussion of frontline danger, remained a central element of this performance. Lieutenant Ismaev expressed this concern when he wrote to his wife: "I'm very happy, that [my parents] are out of harm's way... About me there's nothing to write, I'm healthy."<sup>63</sup> Red Army men still attempted to provide for their families' material needs through the unreliable option of sending home their pay. In typical fashion, one soldier promised his wife: "I do not know if you have received any from me, [but] I have money now from which you will get a sum of 750 rubles every month."<sup>64</sup> When faced with the prospect of confirming their families' fears of frontline danger, wounded soldiers continued to downplay the seriousness of

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<sup>62</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 484 List 3.

<sup>63</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 222 List 5.

<sup>64</sup> Multi-soldier file, here Grigorii M. Makeev. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 254 List 13.

their condition to minimize their loved ones' worry. A soldier on the Leningrad front took a typical approach to report his condition in a reassuring manner: "presently, I am wounded, but it is not serious so do not worry... Kiss [our] son and daughter for me, and tell them that papa will soon be home."<sup>65</sup> Hardship and wounds separated troops from their loved ones, but they began to accept the lack of alternatives to continued separation as the price of familial safety.

The need to kill and see fellow soldiers die increasingly separated troops' war experience from that of their families in the rear as the year wore on. Men at the front often realized that combat altered their sense of self, as an infantryman recalled: "By nature I am a tender and sensitive person. I was never a hooligan or a brawler. But when I went to war I wanted to destroy the Fritzes: 'Kill or be killed.' This was my message to the newcomers."<sup>66</sup> Changes like the one Abdulin described helped very different people integrate into effective units and emotionally connected groups of soldiers, but often at the price of their family ties. A submachine-gunner reflected on the difference between "relatives and the group on which he places his hopes in combat. At times, [the group] will pull him to shelter. I would not give preference to one relationship – they are parallel and very important."<sup>67</sup> Others more casually noted the contrast between the toughness of the combat collective and the comforts of home: "If anyone started to grumble, he was immediately rebuked: 'You haven't come to your mother-in-law's for pancakes!' Quite so!"<sup>68</sup> Growing remoteness from home caused some soldiers, especially squad leaders and NCOs, to worry more about men who were "already married and had a baby son, while the rest of us were still single" or "he is an older man, most likely he has children waiting

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<sup>65</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 110 List 14.

<sup>66</sup> Mansur Abdulin, *Red Road from Stalingrad* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2004), 109.

<sup>67</sup> Recollections of Vladimir T. Evdokimov, in *A my s toboi, brat, iz pekhoty* [And we are with you, brother, from the infantry], ed. Artem Drabkin (Moscow: Iauza, 2012), 29.

<sup>68</sup> Boris Gorbachevsky, *Through the Maelstrom* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 67.

for him to come home.”<sup>69</sup> Such men might remain more anchored in their civilian lives than their combat duties. Troops often idealized home as a safe place as their own lives grew more centered on violence. Soldiers’ feeling of distance from family and their civilian selves contributed to an imagining of front and rear as distinctly masculine and feminine spaces.

Official distinctions between front and rear linked the latter to what the state had provided women, especially in the 1930s, as a place for labor to continue without disruption, while Stalin’s men actively fought at the front, and took back land from the enemy. Women had little to add to this, especially once the masculine ethic reappeared after the start of the German drive to Stalingrad. Heroism was about violent action above all, quantity not quality, whether offensive or defensive. Rather than simply doing other things, women in frontline propaganda appeared to fundamentally lack the capacity for such violence, and were better suited to help men do the job. Soldiers’ participation in killing and reaction to it reveals the cultural transformation of citizen soldiers that took place as the Red Army replenished its ranks in 1942. Killing had profound meaning to individuals, in strong contrast to thoughtless kill count accumulation of the Stakhanovite-at-arms, which provided few soldiers with a serious blueprint for action. Red Army troops believed that killing set them apart from civilians, brought them closer to the veterans among them, and reflected a certain masculine nature to undertake. Because it had such an impact on them, they believed that it defied the capabilities of most women. Troops thus possessed a parallel view of violence dividing the front and rear, but changes to their sense of self, rather than propaganda portrayals, fueled their assessment.

### **Comradeship amidst catastrophe**

The active and effective use of violence against the enemy demanded coordinated collective action, which shaped and was shaped by soldiers’ relationships with one another.

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<sup>69</sup> Petr Mikhin, *Guns Against the Reich* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2010), 31, 37.

Official rhetoric changed in response to Stalin's notorious Order 227 in July of 1942. Military histories typically ignore the order's impact on propaganda in favor of its creation of new punitive disciplinary policies. The new line placed greater emphasis on individual feats and loyalty to the national cause or Stalin as soldiers' motivation. Comradeship among soldiers grew more quickly in the trenches than among the examples of frontline propaganda. While the heroics of ideal fighters alternated between individualistic competition and unit-wide skill-sharing, the rank-and-file began to develop relationships and norms rooted in their initiation to combat and frontline danger. Shared frontline experiences, especially the life-saving knowledge and care veterans provided to hastily deployed replacements, provided a new foundation to frontline culture and the cohesion of Red Army units. The exclusion of women from both sets of norms bridged an otherwise growing gap over the course of the year.

The start of a German offensive on 28 June quickly shattered both Soviet leaders' and soldiers' illusions about victory in 1942. The German army's capture of Sevastopol and rapid drive through the Donbas prompted Stalin to issue Order 227 on 28 July, in an effort to deal with the month-old crisis. The first half of Stalin's Order 227 surveyed the consequences of recent Red Army retreats, and argued against the option of further withdrawal, before it detailed the new disciplinary measures that the Red Army would implement. The first lines of the order explained how the enemy "tears deep into the Soviet Union, invading new regions, devastating and ruining our cities and villages, raping, robbing, and killing the Soviet population."<sup>70</sup> After enumerating the cities already lost in three weeks of fighting, some blamed on premature retreat, the order explained that the Soviet people were "losing faith in the Red Army, and many of them curse the Red Army because it lets our people fall under the yoke of the German oppressors, but

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<sup>70</sup> Stalin, 48.

it itself flows away to the east.”<sup>71</sup> Such a frank admission of Soviet defeats marked a clear departure from Stalin’s own optimistic tone in May and the larger propaganda line of 1942 as the year of victory, and set the precedent for a new, pessimistic tone in subsequent political work and newspaper propaganda.

The priorities emphasized in Order 227 clearly shaped the content of political work, but also sought to motivate soldiers directly. Political reports gauging soldiers’ reactions to the Order reveal its intended impact: to compel soldiers to accept the stakes of victory and defeat, and realize that the desperate fighting that faced them was more desirable than the personal and national consequences of cowardice and retreat. As a result, examples of positive reactions included variations of: “The order is very good and if it had come out earlier, then we would probably not have had such disgraces, as we have endured.” Each soldier’s belief in future Soviet victory provided the only difference from responses deemed negative, such as: “Now this order is ineffective, because it is given too late. Many of our units are already destroyed, so that [we have] no one and nothing to fight with.”<sup>72</sup> Soldiers could criticize the timing of the order and past leadership, as long as they were willing to continue fighting. Such an assessment of soldiers’ views suggests that the propaganda purpose of Order 227 was to use desperation as a motive, to provide soldiers with not only no alternative to resistance, but also a reason to resist.

Within days, the order began to affect both disciplinary practices and political work among soldiers on every front. When Leningrad party leader Zhdanov first addressed political workers after the publication of Order 227, his optimistic advocacy of socialist competition and frontline Stakhanovism in the winter and spring had disappeared. To take its place, Zhdanov explained, “The order of Comrade Stalin...must define the themes, tone, and style of all our

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> TsA FSB RF Fond 14 Opis 4 Delo 912 List 160-161, cited in. *Stalingradskaia Epopeia* [The Stalingrad Epic], ed. Ia. F. Pogonii (Moscow: Zvonitsa-MG, 2000), 172-173.

work,” because “the burdensome and serious danger to our motherland remains.”<sup>73</sup> In September, Soviet president Kalinin echoed Stalin’s order when he explained to junior officers and political workers defending Moscow that “We need to learn from the enemy, to adopt from him all the best practices.”<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Army Commissar Mekhlis reiterated the order’s impact to political workers on the Voronezh Front in September, and then again to Volkhov Front political workers in October, “...Stalin has attached crucial importance to moral factor in war... if we allow cowards take over on the field of battle – then our cause is doomed.”<sup>75</sup> Soviet officials and the Red Army’s PUR actively studied the propaganda impact of the measure on the rank-and-file during the week after Stalin issued it. A series of reports to Deputy Chairman of the State Defense Committee Molotov summarized the order’s impact on soldiers on every front of the war individually, in addition to concrete results in terms of an increase in soldiers punished and local combat outcomes.<sup>76</sup> Order 227 thus changed the direction of political work at the front, and initial assessments before it could affect combat performance, suggested it had a useful propaganda value. In fact, this was its most novel impact, since repression was already robust inside and outside the military.

In the context of Order 227 and the “Last Soviet Man” as a heroic ideal in the second half of 1942, official rhetoric also addressed the issue of comradeship. Stalin appeared as a critical figure in this respect, taking on the role of symbolic NCO among fighting men. In contrast to battles cries of “For Stalin!” *Krasnaia Zvezda* reported soldiers’ individual responses to his national speech in November. Among one set of examples, a soldiers explained how Stalin compelled them to keep fighting while wounded, as if Stalin were present in the sergeant’s

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<sup>73</sup> “...тяжелая и трудная опасность с нашей родины не снята.” RGASPI Fond 77 Opis 1 Delo 773 Listy 2-3.

<sup>74</sup> RGASPI Fond 78 Opis 1 Delo 931 List 4.

<sup>75</sup> RGASPI Fond 386 Opis 2 Delo 1 Listy 7-11.

<sup>76</sup> “Information on the reactions of soldiers and commanders of the Red Army to the order of the People’s Commissar of Defense No. 227.” RGASPI Fond 82 Opis 2 Delo 814 Listy 43-55, 62-66.



dugout, encouraging him to keep fighting: “Regardless of wounds, I am ready to strike the fascist reptiles”<sup>77</sup> Rather than comrades or local leaders among them, Stalin appeared to provide troops with direction and a sense of unified purpose in battle: “It seemed as if a black cloud hung over me and nothing would break through it. But then I read Stalin’s speech and immediately my mood changed entirely.”<sup>78</sup> In short, soldiers acted as if they were to fight with him, so he provided their combat motivation. While Stalin’s speeches and telegrams to outstanding units only appeared every few months, articles such as “Listening to the voice of the leader...”<sup>79</sup> contained more reporting on *ersatz* comradely bonds than articles actually about front life.<sup>79</sup>

In contrast to this emphasis on comradeship, the only other German-killing woman combatant appeared isolated from her comrades and showed no concern for Stalin. Liudmila Pavlichenko, the “Girl with a rifle” went about her day alone after receiving orders from her commander.<sup>80</sup> As a sniper, she shared none of her combat experience with other infantry, and did not participate in competitions with them. Even those favorite female subjects of *Krasnaia Zvezda*, officers’ wives, appeared to have stronger bonds to soldiers motivating them. Based on a letter from the rear, the “Women of the city of Ivanovo” from a local factory collected funds to buy gifts for soldiers after an officers’ wife joined their factory, so that after their gifts led to an exchange of letters “mostly likely, the soldiers ‘of our battery’ in their leisure time talk about the girls from distant Ivanovo and call them ‘our girls’...”<sup>81</sup> The personal connection of one wife thus motivated several women to aid a group of artillerymen at the front, even if there were romantic undertones to their interaction. Beyond such token connections, the official

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<sup>77</sup> “We are fulfilling the Stalinist order,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 11 November 1942, 3.

<sup>78</sup> “Wise Stalinist words,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 12 November 1942, 3.

<sup>79</sup> “Listening to the voice of the leader...” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 10 November 1942, 3.

<sup>80</sup> “Girl with a rifle,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 31 May 1942, 3.

<sup>81</sup> “Women of the city of Ivanovo,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 24 September 1942, 4.

comradeship of the Stakhanovite-at-arms situated women as outsiders at the front, with even less in common with male heroes than their three examples of combat action would suggest.

Red Army troops' recollections about Order 227 varied, but the most significant aspect of their response was neither support nor opposition.<sup>82</sup> Instead, Order 227 shows the nature of soldiers' affiliation at the front, and their distinction between the local collective of brother combatants and the larger collective of their division or army on the Soviet front. A rifle company NCO noted his commander's immediate reassurance about the order's relevance: "Don't worry, guys. Nobody's going to let them send you into a penal company."<sup>83</sup> Gorbachevsky, and many like him, understood Order 227 as responding and applying to men other than themselves and their comrades. An artillery squad leader noted the separation between his men and order's targets: "The order demanded: Die, but do not retreat! It was necessary to halt the unending retreat of Soviet troops towards Stalingrad and the Caucasus at whatever the cost, while we, the troops standing in front of Rzhev, had to capture the city at the cost of our lives and eliminate the threat to Moscow."<sup>84</sup> Such troops were often more concerned by the news of their comrades' rout on the southern front. Whether blaming officers or cowards, or pitying men lacking training and motivation, the Order was separate from them, as a rifleman recalled his reaction to the execution of a deserter from another unit "The military authorities obviously thought that it would act as a deterrent to the rest of us; but the truth is that it cause nothing but indignation among the rank and file."<sup>85</sup> Shame and sanctions were not necessary to

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<sup>82</sup> Censors appear to have flagged and diverted all letters that mentioned it, even if affirmative.

<sup>83</sup> Gorbachevsky, 98.

<sup>84</sup> Mikhin, 21.

<sup>85</sup> Mukhamet Shayakhmetov, *The Silent Steppe* (New York Overlook/Rookery, 2007), 280.

keep him and his comrades on the firing line, and redundant in light of their own norms and obligations to each other.

As the Red Army's crisis over the summer and fall of 1942 grew, rank-and-file soldiers found their ability to endure new hardships severely tested. The intensity of combat and high casualties, not only on the road to Stalingrad but also in battles before Leningrad and around Rzhev, wore down the resolve and altered the perspective of many Red Army men in their letters home.<sup>86</sup> Soldiers began to write openly about the dangers they and their comrades faced, their fears, and above all, the prospect of death. Some troops addressed this subject in terms of defending their families, as one sergeant wrote his wife from the Stalingrad front: "I know that if I perish, then it is for the future happiness of my dear children."<sup>87</sup> Red Army men often emphasized their devotion to family, but their pessimism about survival was clear, as in another soldier's final letter before reaching the front outside Stalingrad: "I'm sorry that we did not have more time together, but nothing can be done about war."<sup>88</sup> While they remained concerned for their families' well-being, and sought to contribute to their finances, they were no longer able to perform the role of the reassuring, worry-free provider-at-war masculinity in their letters home.

The change is particularly striking because soldiers began to make death and danger central subjects of their letters, rather than giving them passing mention. Writing his younger brother only a few weeks into the German offensive, the signaler formerly confident about his frontline contribution explained the new reality of battle: "at every step, every minute, you expect trouble. Death awaits."<sup>89</sup> Providing such honest details not only confirmed family members' fears about the front, but also revealed soldiers' own anxieties and limits. Another

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<sup>86</sup> See Mawdsley, chapter 6 "Moscow, Stalingrad, Leningrad, June 1942 to January 1943."

<sup>87</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 224 List 10.

<sup>88</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 299 List 1.

<sup>89</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 484 List 7-8.

Red Army fighter, a father in his late forties, expressed such sentiments to his wife from the Rzhev Front in early 1943, “I have barely remained alive, but believe that I have lost all hope of survival, now the fighting is large-scale and heavy and horror covers every minute.”<sup>90</sup> A volunteer and machine-gun commander at Stalingrad wrote his mother “A mortar exploded five meters from me, but fortune smiled – I survived,” and then concluded gloomily: “Now I will write every five days. If nothing comes, then I will no longer be alive.”<sup>91</sup> Such letters show that soldiers could no longer lessen the worry of family members by performing the role of the untroubled defender to in their letters, and had to admit the dangers they faced and their difficulty coping.

A greater focus on comrades at the front accompanied this new pessimism about survival, furthering the shift away from the provider-at-war masculinity that had figured prominently in the first year of war. A Crimean Tatar junior lieutenant wrote to his wife: “Many of my comrades from the academy assigned here have been wounded or killed. Several mortars just fell not far from where I am writing.”<sup>92</sup> Soldiers’ growing willingness to share such details communicated not only their proximity to mortal danger, but also the development of new relationships and loyalties at the front. Another soldier began a letter to his mother by detailing the fate of two comrades: “Firstly, I want to report that I am alive and healthy. Ilya Baiakin was killed [10 days ago], and Ivan Bogatov was wounded in his first battle.”<sup>93</sup> This focus on the fate of comrades underscored the breakdown of the earlier letter-writing performances amidst the shocks of dashed expectations and intense and initially unsuccessful battles. Frontline relationships with male comrades, even if newly severed, began to appear along with concern for

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<sup>90</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 157 List 1-2.

<sup>91</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 380 List 15-16.

<sup>92</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 76 List 3.

<sup>93</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1413/6 List 3.

primarily female family members. The initial wartime performance of masculine duty in the letters of Red Army men thus began to break down in favor of an alternative that better addressed the experiences and hardships of extended frontline service.

Red Army soldiers, like their counterparts in most modern armies at war, must develop a sense of self that values the interests or approval of “some collectivity beyond himself” in order to function effectively.<sup>94</sup> The primary group, anchored by combat veterans, provided the main site of this collective affiliation in the late war, when family and homeland grew more remote as victory drew near.<sup>95</sup> While these primary groups in the Red Army did not avowedly exclude women, they consistently espoused values and standards of conduct that non-combatants could not meet. By the post-liberation phase of the war, these primary groups, or combat collectives, took on a clearly gendered character that provided ample reason to disqualify female fighters.<sup>96</sup> Above all, women failed to warrant the status of equal combatants because of their role as objects of sexual desire.

A core element of Red Army troops’ collective bond was their response to shared conditions of service, such as living, marching, and fighting together, which linked them through a sense of shared hardship and danger.<sup>97</sup> As a platoon of infantrymen and snipers discussed, battle provided the ultimate test for an individual, and revealed everything about him to his comrades:

‘Mitya!’ a voice came out of the darkness. ‘You’re simply our hero! It is simply splendid! Just how did you reach him through that storm of fire, huh?’ A deep voice responded, ‘What’s there to be amazed about? A soldier here knows his own business.’

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<sup>94</sup> John Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 24.

<sup>95</sup> Robert S. Rush, *Hell in Hurtgen Forest* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 312.

<sup>96</sup> Indeed, Lynn explains that “a basic function of the group is to set standards” and that “those standards derive from at least three sources. First, that the soldiers face problems and dangers together creates a common interest and a sense of comradeship that helps define standards of conduct. Second, should the army have instilled certain military habits and values, these become part of the group’s standards. Third, values and opinions carried over from civilian life, such as definitions of manly behavior, are fundamental to the entire system of standards.” Lynn, 33-34.

<sup>97</sup> Lynn, 29.

‘Here, my brother, it’s not enough to be simply a soldier...’ ‘Ho-ho-ho!’ the deep voice again rumbled. ‘In war, brother, you’ll find out everything there is to know about a man. Whether he’s dense or has an agile mind, and what sort of heart he has. In combat... how should I say this... people are exposed for who they really are. There’s no masking it.’ What do you know about it, guys? A strong voice hastily began to say. ‘There’s no sort of heroism here. I managed to make my way close to this bunker before anyone else, and then I just stuck a bundle of grenades into it, that’s all.’<sup>98</sup>

These soldiers articulated a larger process at work at the front, one in which men reshaped, or were forced to reconsider, their understandings of self in light of the new and extreme experiences of combat. The nature of battle meant that not only individuals themselves, but also the men around them, could claim to learn “who they really are” in response to the demands of survival, killing, and sacrifice that civilian life, even peacetime military service, scarcely prepared them for. Through a sort of hermeneutics of the fighting spirit, veteran fighting men sought to determine who merited inclusion in their fighting collective or primary group, with the material and psychological aid it provided.<sup>99</sup> These veterans provided models of front behavior, providing recruits with templates in the formation of a soldierly self. How soldiers behaved in combat, not simply whether or not they survived, led to their inclusion as “brothers” or marginalization as men hoping “to be simply a soldier” and selfishly survive unscathed, which created an avowedly gendered hierarchy among men at the front, and thus provided the criteria to exclude women.<sup>100</sup>

Non-combat hardships at the front further contributed to the formation of primary groups among Red Army fighters. Among frontline soldiers, the same action, taken for oneself or for ones comrades, prompted contrasting reactions. The same submachine gunner noted without

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<sup>98</sup> Joseph Pilyushin, *Red Sniper on the Eastern Front* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2010), 164.

<sup>99</sup> Igal Halfin examines the “hermeneutics of the soul” as an “attempt to adduce from his outward behavior the essence of a man, an essence that supposedly lay underneath and invited decipherment. Igal Halfin, “Intimacy in an Ideological Key: The Communist Case of the 1920s and 1930s” in *Language and Revolution: Making Modern Political Identities*, ed. Igal Halfin (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), 185.

<sup>100</sup> Rush, 341-342.

criticism how “one of our soldiers slipped secretly into a food cellar adjacent to a house where an outside office stayed. The officer caught the soldier red-handed and shot him down on the spot” and yet fondly remembered how the next evening, thanks to a thieving orderly, “The main course of our company’s festive table was the goat’s meat. To steal in your shelter is the highest extent of meanness! There we were!”<sup>101</sup> It was with everyday aspects of front life that bonds were forged, even before combat, given the extent of the hardship and the feelings of separation from civilian life that they brought.<sup>102</sup> Traditional practices of Russian working class masculinity, drinking and smoking also added to group bonds outside battle.<sup>103</sup> A tank man remembered how while waiting for the order to advance, “The gun-layer Vitya Belov and the loader Misha Tvorogov lit up ‘goat legs’ [hand-rolled cigarettes] – how quickly they had learned from the ‘old guys’ how to roll a cigarette deftly around the little finger.”<sup>104</sup> In each aspect of front life, both the shared practices themselves and the extra effort that comrades displayed for each other helped build the cohesiveness of their primary group and the linking of their sense of self with it as a collective.<sup>105</sup>

Success in combat shaped the formation of primary group bonds, and the norms of combat units and the combat collectives within them. A young mortar officer fresh from the academy faced serious skepticism from his unit, despite his training, which manifested itself during his first meal with his unit: “Everyone drinks at the front! You should forget being a momma’s boy and be a real man.”<sup>106</sup> For such veterans, absence from the front, even for training, diminished a man’s status, while their established presence conferred superior masculinity. This

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<sup>101</sup> Recollections of Nikolai A. Guzhva in *Tankisti “My pogibali, sgorali”* [Tankers “We killed, burned”], ed. Artem Drabkin, (Moscow: Iauza, 2012), 56-57.

<sup>102</sup> Lynn, 29.

<sup>103</sup> Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 181.

<sup>104</sup> Krysov, 8.

<sup>105</sup> Lynn theorizes that “the practices followed within the structure of the group could also influence cohesion... The more duties are shared, and shared equitably, the stronger the group is likely to become.” Lynn, 33.

<sup>106</sup> Ivan Yakushin, *On the Roads of War* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2005), 29.

was part of a larger phenomenon of primary group cohesion, in which combat veterans “were reluctant to offer their support because they had not yet accepted the replacements. They did not want to make friends with someone who might shortly be killed or wounded.”<sup>107</sup> In the Red Army as it struggled to drive the Germans back in 1942, an aversion to bonding with recruits existed in many units. As one soldier explained, “Since we were a common infantry unit our reinforcements mainly were ineffective – semi-literate or illiterate and untrained men... However, there weren’t any signs of shunning or hostility among us. All newcomers *who came through the first days* accustomed themselves to the war very soon.”<sup>108</sup> Combat itself provided the limiting principle for the inclusion of new men into the front collective, so that men who died after their first or second day in combat did not register as lost comrades. The initiation of raw troops through combat spread a set of norms and values created by veterans, rather than by political workers or propaganda materials alone.

This basis of collective affiliation also contained an exclusionary undercurrent and the means to judge other soldiers at the front outside formal rank structure. In the crisis phase of late 1942, troops assessed the status of officers through the lens of the combat collective. Unsurprisingly, this meant officers faced criticism for failing to fight and face danger, unlike the men under their command. A sniper recalled: “I saw in a flash how Major Orurtsov glanced out of the bunker, and then dived back into it again. He was a strange man: he even slept in his helmet. The soldiers didn’t like him, they thought he was a coward.”<sup>109</sup> Even riflemen who joined the Communist party retained combat criteria for judging officers: “...the political workers, they took part in our battles, never sat behind our backs. So I can say that all our

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<sup>107</sup> Rush, 319.

<sup>108</sup> Emphasis added. Recollections of Nikolai I. Safonov in *Red Army Infantrymen Remember the Great Patriotic War*, ed. Artem Drabkin (Bloomington: Authorhouse, 2009), 175.

<sup>109</sup> Pilyushin, 155.



political workers set examples for us in word and deed.”<sup>110</sup> The standards the primary group established about combat action thus determined status and inclusion in the collective, not rank alone. This sense of solidarity with a particular group of men could grow more important than attachment to the unit around them, the larger collective of the military, or even the national collective.<sup>111</sup>

While officers held a contingent status among their fellow men at the front, men serving in the logistical and auxiliary branches of the Red Army’s rear received universal derision from frontline combatants.<sup>112</sup> The importance of the Red Army’s logistical apparatus increased after liberation, because the distance from Soviet supply depots, industrial centers, and entry points for lend-lease aid grew larger as the frontline moved westward. Part of frontline troops’ sense of their superiority in the war effort appeared in how they defined the front, as one artillery observer explained: “It is interesting to compare the various definitions of ‘forward positions’ that existed at different levels. For example, while some considered the command posts of first echelon regiments or even first echelon divisions as ‘forward positions,’ the infantry correctly considered even the divisional artillery’s indirect firing positions as being deep in the rear area.”<sup>113</sup> Rather than simply distinguish how front zones differed, many soldiers described those who served away from the firing line in explicit contrast to themselves as combatants.

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<sup>110</sup> Recollections of Safonov in Drabkin (2009), 177.

<sup>111</sup> The three types of collective affiliation are not mutually exclusive, but they are rarely balanced in their relative importance. Lynn, 24-25.

<sup>112</sup> Red Army combatants’ use of the terms “front” «фронт» and “rear” «тыл» was complex and often inconsistent, and does not map easily onto the typical Western distinction between front and rear or front and home front. From the combatants’ perspective, there were (at least) two layers of distinction, and that between front and rear was only the first. The second operated within the front itself, in which there was a “firing line” «огненный рубеж» or “forward line” «передовая линия», which was the site of battle, whether offensive or defensive, and then the rest of the front area, under military control and subject to some danger, but confusingly also referred to as the rear. This overlapping of terms seems to have been intentional, as soldiers saw the rear as beginning very quickly after one left the front, in contrast to the civilian view, in which the rear begins only beyond the boundary of direct military jurisdiction. The gender connotations of front and rear on both levels were analogous.

<sup>113</sup> As an artillery observer, Moniushko’s duties saw him operate in the Red Army’s forward trench among the infantry, at observation post parallel with it, and even in no man’s land, depending on tactical considerations and

The desire to fight, as a moral issue, proved to be the most common criticism that fighters voiced. The greatest failing, then, of the men derisively called “rear rats” derived from their conduct in battle: a willingness to let their fear overcome their duty to their comrades.<sup>114</sup> A stubborn mortar crew commander explained the moral causes of Red Army tactical defeats: “most often men of the rear services initiated our routs. As soon as something alarming happened – their wagons and trucks were already rushing at full speed. In contrast to them, a battle tried unit would retreat, not flee, only if its ranks are dispersed.”<sup>115</sup> Such contrast was typical of how fighters compared their units to those of the rear, focusing on the difference in courage between each group, with the rear units reacting in a way totally unacceptable by combatant standards.<sup>116</sup> Rear men’s ignorance of what really counted at the front had a similar effect, as with an infantryman who refused aid for a wounded comrade because he was at the wrong unit’s field hospital: “What could I have done with that bureaucrat? I would’ve liked to put a bullet through his narrow forehead.”<sup>117</sup> Not only rear service men’s cowardice and excessive formality, but also the impact of those tendencies on combat soldiers, constituted moral failings that lowered their status in a hierarchical relationship between different groups of men at the front.<sup>118</sup>

The obviously low place of these “rear rat” servicemen in the judgment of Red Army fighters appears more clearly as an expression of gender hierarchy when one takes into account

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terrain. It was this context that allowed him gain credibility with the infantry to learn their opinions and appreciate how it distinguished between zones of the front, since his duties also brought him away from the firing line to where the actual artillery pieces were deployed. Evgenii D. Moniushko, *From Leningrad to Hungary* (London: Routledge, 2005), 147.

<sup>114</sup> Safonov, 176.

<sup>115</sup> Recollections of Georgii Ivanovich Minin, in Drabkin (2009), 140.

<sup>116</sup> Rear groups may well have had their own feelings of solidarity and even primary group cohesion, as Lynn explains, but with a different set of shared values centered on survival over bravery, because “in certain circumstances, strong small group cohesion lowers combat effectiveness... Group desertions can be evidence of small group cohesion, and so can mutiny... cohesion can be ‘high’ when morale is ‘low’” Lynn, 34-35.

<sup>117</sup> Abdulin, 24.

<sup>118</sup> Demetrakis Z. Demetriou, “Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity: A critique,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 30 No. 3 (2001): 355.

how troops characterized non-combatant Red Army women. Soldiers' assertion of a combatant subjectivity consistently emphasized its superiority to a non-combatant, but still nominally military, femininity. Male troops discussed women's non-combatant service, either separate from combat or separate from the front, as the normal state of affairs, as a machine gunner explained: "Wherefrom could women appear in our trenches? All of them served somewhere in the rear. The only woman whom we could see was our company nurse."<sup>119</sup> Other fighters mentioned contact with women on the rare occasions their units were temporarily relieved from duty on the firing line: "An amusing incident occurred while we were in reserve. One day we learned that a theatrical troupe with three actresses was going to visit the regiment."<sup>120</sup> Another infantryman remembered how on his unit's return from the rear: "We also bypassed [moving away from the front] army trucks full of female *soldiers*, either from hospitals or from medical battalions, or from the steam bath and laundry units."<sup>121</sup> Such non-combatant women were not only a typical sight in the rear, but also seemed to be representative of women in the Red Army, so that "female soldier" could be applied to them, and not reserved for women combatants in particular. While their frequency of contact varied, such soldiers are representative in their view of Red Army women's normal place being in the rear and in non-combatant roles.

Red Army fighters did not limit their observations to where women served, and were quick to ascribe qualities to and make judgments about the non-combatant women they encountered. On the more critical end of the range of views on this subject, soldiers discussed Red Army women as incapable of military service beyond the rear:

A woman is a woman, especially at the front where she was in danger at any time. ...There was in our regiment such a woman named Katia, a stunning woman. She was the regimental commander's 'campaign wife'. ...And this Katia had the orders of the

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<sup>119</sup> Recollections of Ivan A. Garshita in Drabkin (2009), 45.

<sup>120</sup> Gorbachevsky, 291.

<sup>121</sup> Emphasis added. Aleksandr V. Pyl'tsyn, *Shtrafnoi Udar* [Penalty Strike] (Moscow: Znanie, 2003), 86.

Red Banner, of the Red Star and, of course, many medals. They hung so many decorations on her, though she actually didn't know *what the front really meant*.<sup>122</sup>

For such soldiers, Red Army women gained status unfairly through sexual relationships, lacked combat skills, and were unable to deal with the danger and fear that successful soldiers overcame to survive in battle. Other troops expressed this perceived difference in a more sympathetic way, but nevertheless did not expect women to display the toughness or make sacrifices required of their male combatant counterparts.

In this context, criticism of men serving as “rear rats” takes on a more explicitly gendered tone. They failed to live up to not only the highest standards of masculine behavior and solidarity, but fell below those standards to the point of effeminacy, because their character and duties were no different from those of rear service women. In their first hours and days of combat, men formed their sense of what a fighter was and how they would survive together. With a small group, usually formed around elite veterans, who had survived longer and knew more than rear area trainers or commanders, Soviet men developed soldierly subjectivities as combatants, not just servicemen.<sup>123</sup> Accordingly, the skills, qualities, and attitude that allowed men to survive took on a masculine character as they enabled troops to gain the acceptance of a group of men they respected if not admired.<sup>124</sup> Fighting men believed that they risked death and endured pain in combat not simply to survive, or show their toughness, but because they were reciprocating the behavior of their comrades. Those same fighters assumed that their sense of collective motivation and responsibility was lacking in the rear, since new recruits and auxiliary personnel were unprepared for battle.

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<sup>122</sup> Emphasis added. Recollections of Nikolai A. Chistakov in Drabkin (2009), 26-27.

<sup>123</sup> Lynn, 33.

<sup>124</sup> Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 342.

Soldier emphasized the masculine character of their combat collectives by describing them as brotherhoods. They used this term only starting in 1942, when their sense of solidarity and commitment to each other grew strong, and well after official rhetoric deployed it in the first months of the war. A tank man explained that he liked to use

The term brotherhood. The crew was one family. Of course, much depends on the character of the commander and on the character of the crew, but in the majority of cases, in the absolute majority, the crew had one united purpose, it was one person. It never happened, that one or two did something, and the others sat or watched or smoked. Everyone worked together.<sup>125</sup>

Popular usage at the front differed from propagandists' description of the whole Red Army as a brotherhood that followed Stalin's guiding hand. Among infantry, brotherhood could begin on the march to the front, as when soldiers took the packs of those who struggled during overnight marches: "In the war such small gestures of assistance, and others like it, gave rise to frontline brotherhood. ... We particularly valued these unwritten rules of conduct. They eased our difficult army life, drew the men together, and lifted our combat spirits."<sup>126</sup> Troops did not discriminate by age or generation, but they remained selective in terms of who belonged, even among the men of their regiment, by ensuring that everyone received and provided mutual support. Such brotherhoods were not national, nor counted in millions, but close operated as close knit groups that functioned as surrogate families. Individual actions counted, punishment and praise operated outside the rank or disciplinary structure, and men seemed to find few women interested or able to measure up.

In 1942, comradeship, despite its value for unit cohesion and combat effectiveness, provided for the greatest divide between the ideal hero of propaganda and the masculine subjectivities of the rank and file. Order 227 and the propaganda that followed it continued to

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<sup>125</sup> Recollections of Nikolai K. Shishkin in *Ia dralsia s pantservaffe* [I fought against the Panzer forces], ed. Artem Drabkin (Moscow: Iauza, 2007), 254-255.

<sup>126</sup> Gorbachevsky, 65.

ignore comradeship at the front and personal motives at large in favor of a duty to the national collective and to Stalin as the father of heroes and founder of Soviet military-industrial power. Comradeship was unnecessary beyond the utilitarian spread of tactical knowledge, since all heroes focused on Stalin during the period of victorious advance and the national collective during the period of looming catastrophe. New attention to the people's role and their security needs marked a significant change from 1941, because it reinforced the masculine character of the front and combat roles just as women began fighting in their own defense in larger numbers. Accordingly, women's breakthrough into combat roles received no clear celebration or integration into hero narratives during either half of the year. Instead, women primarily appeared as civilians in frontline propaganda narratives to reinforce soldiers' motivation and the emphasized the gendering of military power. Order 227 also shows growing gulf between official narrative and soldiers' opinions and motivations, which appear as a breakdown of internal hegemony within the masculine bloc.

Soldiers' formation of comradely bonds and masculine subjectivities re-oriented to frontline life due to their greater time at front and relative stability of fighting while the Red Army trained a reserve of fresh units before the Stalingrad counter-offensive late in 1942. These developments in frontline culture reveal that the influx of women to the front served only to reinforce masculine character of frontline culture and affiliation, and feminization of non-combatant men, rather than overturning dominant culture or group dynamics. Soldierly subjectivities focused on the sub-unit-sized collective of primary group, not Red Army or Soviet population at large, which was not inherently a problem for military effectiveness, but revealed the limited effectiveness of official rhetoric and political work. The growth of frontline bonds also revealed the decline of family connections with no end to the war in sight by mid-year.

Given the articulation of two clear models of soldierly behavior in the Stakhanovite-at-arms and the Last Soviet Man, soldiers' orientation toward local front groups shows how independent their thinking could be, especially when spurred by the incongruity between official rhetoric and front experience.

## **Conclusion**

The experience and exercise of violence dramatically reshaped Soviet perceptions of the war effort by integrating the enemy as a counterpoint to heroic masculine ideals and driving individual men to form new relationships and communities at the front. With the discovery of heinous crimes, German forces provided Soviet propagandists with ample material for an enemy other to demonize, although soldiers judgments refrained from making strong judgments until they had experience such crimes for themselves. Contrasting uses and targets of violence distinguished official heroic and enemy masculinities, while fighting men found combat and violence to have a transformative impact on their sense of self. Prolonged exposure to frontline hardships and dangers fueled comradeship despite official rhetoric that focused on the national emergency along with discussions of Stalin's personal relationship with soldiers.

The new focus on the enemy in 1942 revealed a greater shift from an invasion that threatened the state in 1941 to a horrific enemy that menaced the Soviet people. Frontline propaganda's demonology relied on written descriptions of the enemy, which reveals a vastly different approach than that of visual sources that scholars have primarily examined.<sup>127</sup> Propagandists focused on the character and motives of the enemy to explain his violent actions, which targeted Soviet women and children above all. Rather than simply dehumanizing the enemy, frontline newspapers presented an enemy soldier who contrasted with his counterpart in

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<sup>127</sup> Stephen M. Norris, *A War of Images* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 179-185. Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 220-224.

the Red Army in very specific ways, but remained comparable as well as different. He emerged as an “other” to the Red Army hero as a soldier and as a man, defined by opposing notions of honor regarding motives for waging war, the individual use of violence, treatment of women, and personal courage in the face of danger. The enemy’s villainy therefore rested on heinous wartime behavior and motivation, rather than ideological differences, historical connections, or leaders’ machinations. The depiction of the enemy that emerged reinforced the masculine ethic and underpinned exhortations to drive him out of Soviet territory. Despite this sustained effort, soldiers’ reaction to the enemy were quite varied, and the universal hatred expressed in print rarely echoed in soldiers’ views, even in hindsight, without firsthand experience of atrocities.

The rational and justified use of violence distinguished Red Army heroes in official rhetoric from the bloodthirsty and bestial sexual impulses that drove the enemy. Women remained largely passive figures amidst the focus on violence despite their influx into the Red Army’s ranks. Those who took up arms against the enemy in official rhetoric did not fit the prevailing ideal of heroism, and this reinforced the idea that women were out of place in combat, if not at the front overall. This lack of change complemented the narrative of men’s duty to protect women. Soviet men were less likely to have anticipated their involvement in a full wartime scenario or personal military role than did the young women Anna Krylova studied, and instead seemed to have struggled with early experiences of violence.<sup>128</sup> However, killing remained a duty, rather than an act of pleasure for most, so that it defined them as soldiers but was part of soldiering, part of that world, not something they were doing for themselves (like winning a competition). The process and its outcome rooted them more firmly at the front, distancing them from their civilian lives. Fighting became a shared experience of comrades locally, which affirmed their belonging with veterans, and kept them alive. This contradicts

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<sup>128</sup> Krylova, 49-83.



Amir Weiner's assertion that an integral brutality and a quarter-century of violent mobilization in the Soviet system prepared young men to resist the German invader like no other people in Europe.<sup>129</sup>

The Soviet idea of enemy masculinity contrasted significantly from that of its two major allies, the United States and Great Britain, both in content and in the extent to which it helped define their respective heroic masculinities. In British newspaper propaganda, the enemy appeared as an overly-militarized but professional soldier: focused only on war and combat, always in the company of other soldiers, quick to show dominance and aggression, and utterly devoid of civilian relationships or interests. In contrast, British soldiers appeared as typical citizens above all: husbands and fathers, who retained their civilian personas and morality in wartime through humor, camaraderie, and reserved emotions.<sup>130</sup> The prevailing American view of the German enemy was essentially that of an honorable foe, although a clear competitor in masculine vigor and physical power. However, American propaganda appeared quite similar to its Soviet counterpart when discussing its Japanese enemy. Racist rhetoric constructed the enemy as a savage killer, prone to torture and rape, and often compared him to animal figures such as monkeys or gorillas.<sup>131</sup> In both cases, much more limited experiences of German soldiers in battle and occupation were likely a factor in the more restrained presentation of the German enemy, just as specific atrocities appeared as a consistent feature of the Soviet idea of enemy. Nonetheless, the differing cases of its allies show the extent and significance of the enemy in Soviet efforts to define the Red Army hero and motivate soldiers to fight.

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<sup>129</sup> Amir Weiner, "Something to Die For, a Lot to Kill for," in *The Barbarization of Warfare*, ed. George Kassimeris (New York: NYU University Press, 2006).

<sup>130</sup> Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 153-159.

<sup>131</sup> Christina Jarvis, *The male body at war: American masculinity during World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), 125-129.

Order 227 introduced a critical difference between soldier-specific and civilian-oriented propaganda, since it was not published and letters home about it were censored. The order is typically read in military context with a focus on punitive measures, but not the context of frontline culture, although some scholarship has recently asserted it as part of some frontline zeitgeist that reflected soldiers' unvoiced opinion.<sup>132</sup> However, the order's emphasis on ending further retreats fits the larger promotion of a masculine ethic premised on defending the civilian population, which was consistently feminized in propaganda intended for soldiers. Moreover, Stalin's authoritative voice complemented his recurring role as a source of personal inspiration to soldiers, whether in their competitions or as a comradely source of advice and motivation. Soldiers' sustained exposure to hardship and danger provided them with a new appreciation for their comrades and a diminished connection to the seemingly tranquil world of home. The comradeship of primary groups, not deserters' executions, figured most prominently in soldiers' letters and recollections. The longer a soldier remained in the Red Army, the more his sense of self adapted to the realities of life at the front.

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<sup>132</sup> See Mawdsley, 167-169, and Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War* (New York: Picador, 2006), 155-157.

CHAPTER 4  
AVENGING AND MOURNING: HIERARCHIES AND COMMUNITIES AFTER STALINGRAD, 1943-1944

The Red Army's victory at Stalingrad on 3 February 1943 constituted the first unambiguous destruction of an entire German army. The impact of this victory extended into frontline culture and soldier-specific propaganda. However, amidst feelings of great relief and joy, soldiers and leaders alike remained acutely aware of the battles that lay ahead on other fronts. Soviet leaders realized that their momentum stalled before the end of February, while soldiers' sense of vulnerability persisted, even if their sacrifices enabled greater military gains. This chapter examines the fifteen months after Stalingrad, which saw fighting continue exclusively within the boundaries of the Soviet Union. During this time, official rhetoric focused on revenge and liberation as primary motives for soldier heroes. Among the rank-and-file, revenge had begun to emerge as a motive before the Stalingrad victory, and grew in significance afterward. The basic requirement for revenge as a motivation was soldiers dying, and that continued in great quantities after Stalingrad, despite the overall improvement of Red Army equipment and leadership as the war progressed.<sup>1</sup> The drive for vengeance distinguished the two: while propaganda emphasized vengeance for national victimization linked to national liberation, troops avenged their comrades as a personal duty that also included greater attention to death and burial practices. Stalin's leadership and paternal care for soldiers received new emphasis in soldier-specific propaganda as the basis for heroism, liberation, and national unity, but did little to turn soldiers' attention from their comrades.

A mobilization surge that saw non-Slavic soldiers' reach their greatest numbers in the Red Army in 1943 also reoriented political work. The Red Army needed to mobilize new forces

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<sup>1</sup> Total losses, including wounded and sick, increased from just over 7 million in 1942 to 7.85 million in 1943. G. F. Krivosheev, ed. *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century* (London: Greenhill Books, 1997), 94.

after victory at Stalingrad to maintain its advance as the enemy retreated. Non-Slavic soldiers provided those recruits in 1943, which raised the proportion of non-Slavs in infantry divisions to a wartime high of 23.19% in July 1943. By January 1944, after the Red Army liberated most of Ukraine and southeast Belorussia, the proportion of those two Slavic nationalities in the Red Army had doubled from July. Mobilization pressures also began to decline when the Red Army began to substitute firepower for manpower in 1944.<sup>2</sup> The influx of Slavic recruits from the occupied population and re-deployed partisan forces in these areas diminished the need for non-Slavic soldiers, so that they made up just 12.25% of Red Army personnel by July 1944, a decline of almost one half from a year earlier.<sup>3</sup> The periods of greatest attention from PUR officials and greatest participation of non-Slavic soldiers in the Red Army coincided almost exactly.

The gendered language propagandists and fighting men used to define motives and duty continued to link their discussions of the war effort. After Stalingrad, propaganda began to reassert Stalin's national leadership role as well as the values of paternal guidance that figured prominently in the second half of the 1930s. Within frontline culture, the personal and local connections of the combat collective preserved masculine predominance and established ideals of conduct that preceded their publication in soldier-specific propaganda. In official and soldierly writings, national and personal variants distinguished the otherwise common motive of revenge, which appeared in every case as an exclusively masculine capability and motive to kill. Official rhetoric contrasted feminine martyrdom with heroic feats and the glorious deaths of

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<sup>2</sup> John Ericson, "Red Army Battlefield Performance, 1941-1945," in *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West*, ed. Paul Addison et al. (London: Pimlico, 1997), and Amnon Sella, *The Value of Human Life in Soviet Warfare* (London: Routledge, 1992), 186-192.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the difficulties and unevenness of partisans' (re-)integration into the Red Army, see Kenneth Slepyan, *Stalin's Guerrillas: Soviet Partisans in World War II* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 270-277. National proportions based on what is apparently the only examination of the issue, referenced in both Russian and English studies of the subject, but most fully cited in Susan L. Curran and Dmitry Ponomareff, "Managing the Ethnic Factor in the Russian and Soviet Armed Forces: A Historical Overview," in *Ethnic Minorities in the Red Army: Asset or Liability?*, ed. Alexander R. Alexiev et al. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 54-60.

masculine heroes. Official rhetoric now linked heroic fighting men to Stalin directly, while women fighters lacked a personal connection to the leader. Red Army men grew more committed to honoring their dead because their family situations had stabilized: loved ones were either dead, safely in the rear, or well behind enemy lines, so they focused on their comrades unless circumstances changed.

Troops defined heroism as a masculine prerogative, but one rooted in shared risk and sacrifice, separate from both their families at home and the larger military collective outside their units. The paternal and masculine depiction of Stalin's leadership figured most prominently in the new focus on soldiers' care, especially that of non-Slavic soldiers. Expressions of national hierarchy took on a gendered form, while the paternal care of officers paralleled that of Stalin for the country as a whole. While rhetoric of a multi-national Soviet family appeared, the multinational brotherhood of fighters included a much smaller sub-group of masculine, fighting nations, leaving women working in the rear to represent lesser peoples' contributions to the war effort. Among Red Army fighters, discussions of brotherhood appeared, and soldiers' affiliation with their combat collectives grew stronger. Combat skill and fighting spirit remained the criteria for assessing and excluding officers, women, and multi-national replacement troops.

Explaining the extent and limits of Stalingrad's role as a turning point in the war constitutes an important problem in Soviet cultural and military history. How did different yet overlapping revenge motives develop in frontline culture and official rhetoric? Why did soldiers increasingly focus on death after Red Army victory at Stalingrad, when propaganda promoted liberation and victory as the tasks of 1943? How did the emergence of Stalin's leadership role and non-Slavic soldiers distinguish the post-Stalingrad period? Why did women fighters remain marginal amidst these developments? This chapter approaches the question of Stalingrad

constituting a turning point by examining the gendered rhetoric and practice surrounding several aspects of the Soviet war effort.

### **Vengeful Liberator and Liberating Avenger**

In official rhetoric, the motives of liberation and revenge both served larger Soviet objectives of preparing soldiers who had succeeded in defense to engage in sustained offensive operations for the first time. In his instructions to the political workers of the entire Volkhov Front, Army Commissar Lev Mekhlis identified the problem that “because the fighting ranks of the infantry consider defense the normal type of battle, from your first sentence you must emphasize that OFFENSIVE BATTLE is the PRIMARY type of Red Army military action.” Such battles were “how comrade Stalin SECURED the Red Army’s victory in the RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR,” and were likewise essential to the strategic goals of liberation for their front, namely “to break the blockade of the great hero city, of the city of Leningrad.”<sup>4</sup> At year’s end, Leningrad party boss Andrei Zhdanov echoed those sentiments to Leningrad Front’s political workers, as the city remained under siege. His speech at the conference explained how defensive victory was not enough, and that “We must show the whole country, the whole Soviet people our Leningraders’ honor in a decisive battle to drive the enemy from the Leningrad oblast, in the final liberation of Leningrad.”<sup>5</sup> Both political leaders directed political workers to stress the goal of liberation, with its implicit need to advance. As the best motive to keep soldiers focused on the importance of offensive operations in 1943, liberation figured more prominently in official rhetoric than revenge. This shift is significant as a response to both the changing course of the war and a complacent defensive-mindedness detected among soldiers.

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<sup>4</sup> Capitalization in original speech transcript, 2 January 1943. RGASPI Fond 386 Opis 2 Delo 2 List 71.

<sup>5</sup> Late December 1943, some time before the start of the Leningrad-Novgorod Strategic Offensive that finally ended the siege. RGASPI Fond 77 Opis 1 Delo 783 List 4.

Much like liberation, revenge appeared in official rhetoric as something women did not seek or carry out. For women at home, male relatives appeared as the main connection women had to the frontline reality of war, as was the case with the title character, “Katia,” in a short story by officially celebrated author Alexei Tolstoy. Upon receiving official notification that her brother was missing and presumed dead at the front, she “read and re-read” the letter, “quietly cried into a pillow” and “the next day she went to the military committee. They sent her to the front as a medic.”<sup>6</sup> Although the story ends happily with a frontline reunion between sister and not-dead brother, at no point does revenge or even hatred of the enemy enter her thoughts or motivate her actions. She simply “felt the war” and resolved to play a greater role, but took no violent action against the enemy. The same was true of women official rhetoric depicted facing the German attacks. A partisan woman, Marusia, “prepared food for the detachment” while her husband, Zakhar, “all day disappeared in scouting missions.” When Zakhar sacrificed himself so Marusia could escape encirclement by the enemy, she ran and hid with an old woman’s help, and set off to find a new partisan unit in the forest saying “Stay alive... Stay alive... Stay alive...”<sup>7</sup> Both women appeared in soldier-specific propaganda as having men fight and die for them, but neither sought revenge directly or even tried to harm the enemy. Such depictions of women as loyal but passive patriots reinforced the idea that revenge only motivated men.

Soldiers’ sense of duty and expressions of motivation responded to the dramatic changes in Soviet fortunes in late 1942 and their implications after Stalingrad. Concern for family did not disappear, but lost its preeminence for many soldiers, who began to express the importance of frontline bonds alongside family bonds in their letters. Revenge became a widespread motive

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<sup>6</sup> “Katia,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 1 May 1943, 3.

<sup>7</sup> “Partisan Woman,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 29 September 1943, 4.

and means of expressing hatred for the enemy, after appearing rarely in the first months of the year. Red Army troops expressed their duty to avenge comrades killed in battle, as “Fighter-Avengers,” who found motivation to fight and comfort in the face of death in their frontline collectives of small numbers of comrades. Despite greater responsiveness and realism in propaganda during the second half of 1942, soldiers’ personal relationships and local affiliations grew stronger during and after Stalingrad. Women remained largely outside such groupings despite their growing presence at the front, even as combatants.

Red Army troops’ new willingness to discuss the death and danger that faced them at the front was more than a reflection of the intensity of combat, and emerged as part of a new sense of masculine duty towards their comrades, the “Fighter-avenger,” which centered on revenge. Earlier in 1942, comrades’ deaths prompted soldiers to respond simply, without vows of revenge, as one pilot explained to his mother in February: “Rozhin died heroically, our unit will preserve his memory.”<sup>8</sup> Troops also expressed a desire to avenge family members killed in the rear, which one tank commander described in vivid terms to his grieving wife in June: “I find it easier to take revenge for [our] son – I am able to destroy the enemy and watch with great joy, how the damned Fritzes fall before the fire of my tank.”<sup>9</sup> Another soldier expressed the common motive of liberating, rather than avenging, a home region under occupation as an enduring connection to home and family: “our units are advancing ever further to the west and ever closer to my home city of Kiev... which leaves only one priority, to destroy more lousy Fritzes.”<sup>10</sup> Red Army men’s sentiments show that a family tragedy or major event could break through and the declining sense of connection and duty to family in letters. Such crises, forcing soldiers to engage their

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<sup>8</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 395 List 6, 9.

<sup>9</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 62 List 10.

<sup>10</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1163 List 1.



family ties beyond performance of the “Provider-at-war” masculinity, could enable family duty to regain prominence over their growing sense of duty to comrades.

After the German offensive began, and Soviet losses mounted, promises of revenge quickly grew more common in the letters of Red Army men. While these vows often appeared in letters of condolence to the surviving relatives of fallen, they were just as likely to appear in the regular letters soldiers wrote to their own families.<sup>11</sup> The site in which such promises appeared is significant, because it suggests that revenge took the place of acute family concern as part of a new sense of personal duty, rather than customary language written out of courtesy or obligation.<sup>12</sup> The new importance of comrades and revenge in place of concern for family appears in a letter from a political worker to his future wife, who explained his delayed response as a function of his priorities. “Zina, I received your message about [what is happening in] Ovecherniki already, but I simply have had to write out [my feelings] about the death of such a friend and commissar, and now here in my unit I have made clear my general desire to get revenge for my commissar.”<sup>13</sup> The shared proximity to death, rather than simply danger, proved central to the bonds soldiers shared and their duty to avenge each other. One Red Army man expressed the connection of comradeship and the possibility of death (which the death of so many comrades had made real) in a letter home: “I, after all, will also have no one to tell, if I return from war unharmed, about all of the frightful meetings with Germans, about tank attacks, when fire came from every direction, metal and death, about the dances and songs of tank men in minutes of rest, about the touching friendship of battle comrades.”<sup>14</sup> Developed while risking

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<sup>11</sup> Condolence letters usually contained some combination of the following: praise for the fallen soldier as a friend or fighter, a description of how he died in battle, whatever burial took place, and vows of memory and revenge.

<sup>12</sup> Soldiers wrote such letters voluntarily, in addition to the literally fill-in-the-blanks official notification card.

<sup>13</sup> He had mentioned the commissar by name and their shared experience of mortal danger in battle together in a previous letter. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 110 List 8.

<sup>14</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 62 List 189.

and expecting death, and prone to ending suddenly, such friendships developed into a sense of duty that extended beyond death during the desperate months of late 1942.

While soldiers' letters allow limited access to the types of relationships and interactions soldiers shared at the front, they provide ample evidence about the duty felt toward their dead comrades. This new duty, the "Fighter-avenger," was an all-male form of interaction and expression of commitment and care through the promise and act of revenge, which contrasted with both the writing and actions through which soldiers cared for their predominantly female family members. In a condolence letter, five soldiers signed a letter that promised: "For the death of your beloved brother and our battle comrade we will fully take revenge on the damned fanatics." A sixth comrade wrote a separate message at the end of the letter to emphasize his closeness to the deceased: "Aleksandr Vasil'evich and I served together in the ranks from 1939 and we were together until the day of his death in the same communications unit. ...For Sasha's death, we have completely taken revenge on the enemy. And we will [continue] to take revenge!"<sup>15</sup> The sense of duty connected certain groups of soldiers beyond the requirements of the chain of command between living fighters.

This sense of duty to the dead inspired hatred of the enemy and motivated soldiers to kill, which allowed troops to care for one another in death, since doing so in life lay outside of their control. A lieutenant who volunteered for the front explained the power of fighters' response to the torture and killing of comrades: "Yesterday I buried eight men (corpses) of our tortured soldiers and commanders...Such are the actions of the enemy...Every comrade who saw this with his own eyes or whom we told about it has vowed to take revenge."<sup>16</sup> Beyond the hatred and motivation, this duty of revenge seemed to provide soldiers with some consolation, as they

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<sup>15</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 484 List 1.

<sup>16</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 99 List 1-2.

feared for their own lives. An Azerbaijani soldier expressed this combination of revenge and fear as he discussed the context of his writing: “In this evening’s battle alone, we lost seven. Two of our soldiers have been posthumously awarded [the rank of] Hero of the Soviet Union. We will avenge our friends. Miastan, I write this letter to you after battle in the moonlight. Every minute death awaits. God forbid, if I die, don’t grieve too much.”<sup>17</sup> Given Red Army troops’ logical connection of comrades’ deaths to the likelihood of their own, revenge meant the comfort and care of both mutual defense among living fighters and vengeance and remembrance when death came. Performing the duty of the “Fighter-avenger” was thus something that only soldiers could offer each other, man to man, at the front, completely separate from the protection they attempted to provide their families.

The bonds formed between comrades could not be replaced as easily as units could be reinforced, and the veterans of 1942 saw their ranks shrink, leading a 24 year-old tank commander to report to his mother “I am already the old man in the brigade.”<sup>18</sup> In such a context, revenge could continuously motivate soldiers to fight, and remained a prominent subject in soldiers’ letters to family members. The impact of the sudden loss continued to make revenge the sole focus of many letters home and displaced any discussion of conditions there. One soldier recalled the tragic scene of his comrade’s death: “how Grisha cried and asked me to pass on a letter... My heart hurts, I want to cry, but I will not cry, because the Hitlerites will not rejoice about this, we will [instead] leave the Hitlerites to cry... We need to have revenge [and] to destroy the beast.”<sup>19</sup> Red Army men continued to discuss with family the pain and anger that

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<sup>17</sup> RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1429-3 List 1.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Aleksandr A. Kosmodemianskii to his mother, 14 February 1944. RGASPI M-33 Opis 7 Delo 650 List 97.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Aleksei F. Avtunich to his sister, 8 April 1943. RGASPI M-33 Opis 1 Delo 193 List 1.

accompanied their need to avenge comrades' deaths in battle, but their responses to death at the front also began to evolve.

Red Army troops' desire to write greater and greater numbers of condolence letters in response to comrades' deaths speaks to the continued development of a frontline culture rooted in their everyday experiences, and the constant issue of their mortality. These condolence letters became a central means for soldiers' to assert their duty to avenge the fallen, as one vowed to "strike at the fascist vermin, taking revenge on them for my friend Lesha," after explaining the deceased was his "best friend that I trained with and knew for three years."<sup>20</sup> The Soviet people's desire for revenge may have been relatively universal, but soldiers' saw their ability to carry it out as something, like killing the enemy generally, which separated their role in the war from those in the rear. One soldier wrote to his brother, fighting on another part of the front, about women's requests for revenge in response to his letters: "mothers, wives in every letter ask me to take revenge on bloody Hitler for the deaths of their only sons, whom the Germans have taken from her forever. I think you are right to take revenge for her sons, as you have described."<sup>21</sup> Another specifically contrasted his response to that of his dead comrades' girlfriend "I have one piece of advice for you: take it like a man... you mourn his death, and we at the front answer with our battle successes in the task of destroying the German occupiers, and will ferociously and mercilessly take revenge."<sup>22</sup> Such letters express an understanding of different responses and different obligations for the female relatives and male comrades of a dead fighter.

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<sup>20</sup> Letter from Andrei to wife of Aleksei T. Kuz'menko 29 March 1944. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 699 List 1.

<sup>21</sup> Letter between soldier brothers, Petr to Arkadii Mankov 16 July 1943. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 850 List 2.

<sup>22</sup> "у меня будем один Вам совет: мужайтесь." Letter from unnamed comrade to girlfriend of Aleksandr S. Koshman. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1386 List 84.

The phenomenon of more than one soldier writing to the family of a single fallen comrade further demonstrates the development of frontline culture around comrades' deaths and vengeance. Such letters usually reflected different relationships to the deceased, rather than different information for the family's benefit, since the latter received a formal notice of death. Some soldiers used these letters to express the extent of their connection to the fallen, as one Red Army fighter described his comrade's last moments, "My very best friend...Mitrofan died in my arms. After being heavily wounded by a piece of shrapnel in the chest he lived only 3 minutes." A separate letter from his deputy commander explained "First, I want to say that Mitia, as I called him, was my foremost good friend and commander...Remember, that this great loss hurts not only you but us. We vow to avenge Mitrofan."<sup>23</sup> Discussing comrades' deaths freed soldiers to express their feelings more openly, which condolence letters different from those they wrote to their own families about frontline hardship. One infantryman focused on remembering and avenging his fallen comrade: "our unit will never forget the name Evgenii Iakovlevich Kuzmin, and the enemy will receive a blow ten times as strong for the death of your son," while another confessed "we lived like brothers, ate and drank from one bowl and I could not stop from crying when I saw my comrade had died."<sup>24</sup> Each letter differed in how it described the brotherly bonds Red Army men had formed at the front, but their shared commitment to revenge remained a unifying theme. That so many soldiers felt compelled to express their own relationship to the family of a fallen comrade illustrates how soldiers sense of duty to each other continued to develop after Stalingrad, as the bonds of comradeship strengthened but the Red Army continued to suffer losses.

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<sup>23</sup> Letters from Vitalii V. Nikolaev and Isakbai Aitaksinov 4 September and 29 October 1943. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1418/1 Listy 3, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Letters from V.M. Shashkin and Petr I. Kazantsev to mother of Evgenii Ia. Kuzmin 22 July and 25 September 1943. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 53 Listy 101, 104-105.

Troops' discussions of revenge also invoked ideas of soldierly honor as a distinction between Soviet and German forces, although they lacked consistency. A tank gunner explained the limits of his vengeance: "I would never shoot prisoners, though. Why do it? There might be a peasant among them – not a Nazi at all – or a Frenchmen who'd been forced to fight... For this reason I never shot them; I ruled it out as a matter of principle."<sup>25</sup> The restrained and measured use of violence, limited to enemies who continued to fight, limited his pursuit of revenge and contrasted with the enemy's willingness to harm the helpless. For many soldiers, honor mattered, but was wholly compatible with revenge. A penal battalion soldier explained this combination after liberating a town: "Yes, the judgment over two unarmed people had been arbitrary, but these people themselves had started the vileness – and we had finished it, so as to finish it forever."<sup>26</sup> An infantryman explained a scene that doomed captured Germans as his unit liberated Ukraine: "The Nazis invented the most savage methods to torment their prisoners... the Germans used metal hooks to hang people by a rib, a leg, an arm, the jaw... There was not a force in the world that would make me stop this just punishment of the Nazi butchers."<sup>27</sup> In the latter two cases, German criminality justified revenge against specific prisoners that local witnesses linked to atrocities. Despite their apparent difference from the tank gunner's principle, the infantrymen shared with him a belief that Red Army troops' thoughtful and precise approach to killing distinguished them from their German counterparts.

Personal experience appears to have played such a significant role, and revenge proved so resilient a motive, because of the timing of soldiers' formation of those bonds with each other. Soldiers who developed a sense of brotherhood during the worst of times only to lose those comrades when Soviet fortunes had improved saw little evidence of a turning point in the war, or

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<sup>25</sup> Vasilii Krysov, *Panzer Destroyer* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2010), 90.

<sup>26</sup> Nikolai Litvin, *800 Days on the Eastern Front* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 71.

<sup>27</sup> Mansur Abdulin, *Red Road from Stalingrad* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2004), 130.

reason to change their behavior. For them, the general hardships and mortal danger of front life were no less apparent, which gave their methods of coping with loss and facing their own mortality an enduring value.

The Red Army's expulsion of German forces from most of the Russian regions of the Soviet Union and advance into Ukraine and southeastern Belarus compelled fighters to seek out their families as the front reached and passed their home regions. This new concern for liberation was particularly evident in soldiers' public letters, sent to the Soviet radio service. The radio program "Comintern" allowed troops to communicate with civilian family members about their whereabouts or to relatives in the military about the status of their kin. The letters soldiers sent to this service only began to discuss liberation and reunion regularly in 1943.

Letters promising to personally free family members were the most personal way liberation motivated soldiers, because it combined their duties to front and home in a single task. Some fighters proudly expressed this sense of extra motivation in their letters: "Now with the nearing of our Red Army to my home, I exert even more strength and energy in order to rescue my dear ones from German slavery sooner."<sup>28</sup> Other soldiers were more honest about the uncertainty of their ability to fulfill their aim: "I am working effectively to speed the destruction of the German occupiers...but I have not received from [my family] any news since September 1941 and have not known where they are since that time."<sup>29</sup> Such concern for family as a way of understanding the war resembles the "Provider-at-war" masculine duty soldiers expressed during the first year of the war (see chapters 2 and 3). However, these soldiers were not writing to their loved ones directly, and had little chance of personally liberating their home city or village, given the scale of territory and size of military forces involved. For those fortunate enough,

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<sup>28</sup> Letter from Aleksandr N. Bondar to radio committee 18 November 1943. GARF Fond 6903 Opis 9 Delo 608 List 181.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Efim V. Sidorenko to radio committee 3 February 1944. GARF Fond 6903 Opis 9 Delo 901 List 50.

other Red Army forces liberated their families. Infantrymen Panfilenko was among them, and wrote: “I heard on the radio the good news of your liberation from the German scum.”<sup>30</sup> Such soldiers had to continue fighting of course, and wartime experiences likely inspired fresh motivation.

Indeed, among fighters less fortunate than Panfilenko, liberation ceased to be a motive because they discovered that their families were dead, rather than saved by anonymous fellow soldiers in other units. A pair of tank lieutenants from the same region expressed their dashed hopes of liberation: “we came to liberate our land, where we were born and grew up. And so, we arrived to find only pillaged ruins and not a single creature left alive... Seeing all the horror and atrocity of the German robbers we with still greater frenzy advanced to the west.”<sup>31</sup> What linked such letters was who wrote to whom, and how simply revenge replaced liberation as a motive. While some soldiers, unlike the lieutenants, had family evacuated to work in the rear as well as relatives who remained behind, many more had only family under occupation or serving in the Red Army on a separate front.<sup>32</sup>

Typically, a soldier wrote to his brother on another front, one informing the other of their family’s fate: “My dear little brother, mercilessly take revenge on the bloodthirsty Hitlerite dogs for the death of our mother and for all the crimes the Germans have inflicted on our land.”<sup>33</sup> In addition to vengeance letters between brothers, others appeared between father and son, in which the shared masculine role of avenger superseded generational difference. One pilot thus

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<sup>30</sup> Letter from Aleksandr P. Panfilenko to radio committee 11 February 1944. GARF Fond 6903 Opis 9 Delo 901 List 100.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Aleksei S Alekseev and Nikolai I. Borisov to radio committee 6 March 1944. GARF Fond 6903 Opis 9 Delo 883 List 162.

<sup>32</sup> Evacuation frequently separated families, usually allowing skilled workers to evacuate their spouses and children, but not parents or younger siblings who lacked immediate value to the war effort. Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 5, 16-17.

<sup>33</sup> Letter from Aleksandr P. Denisov to Mikhail P. Denisov via radio committee 29 March 1944. GARF Fond 6903 Opis 9 Delo 903 List 133.



informed his father elsewhere at the front about their family's fate: "Dad, my mom and your wife and little brother Evgenii your son are not among the living...dad, avenge mom and little brother Evgenii and I in my realm will also take revenge on more than one fascist plane."<sup>34</sup> The shared desire among male relatives to avenge family members they could not liberate was certainly a common one, and only reinforced the motivation to seek revenge in battle that Red Army men already developed in response to their comrades' deaths.

Nevertheless, there were frontline experiences that reinforced liberation as a motive for Red Army troops beyond the intense but unrealistic desire to free their families personally. Individual soldiers who first entered a populated area usually felt overwhelmed at the sight of devastation, suggesting that propaganda had not prepared them "to see this nightmare."<sup>35</sup> Their compatriots' suffering underscored the urgency and justness of their drive for liberation, as a tank lieutenant explained: "...better to live poorly, but not to see the horrors of war. The people languish under the yoke of fascism and await our help, and we are applying all of our strength, fighting for liberation...so that this plague on our land will end."<sup>36</sup> Red Army troops found Soviet civilians' grateful reaction to their arrival just as compelling, which inspired sympathy for those still occupied: "in many forests and villages the population waited for the Red Army. They greeted us with bread and salt. They sent us on our way fried chicken, eggs, dumplings, milk and so on, of course [only in] those places they had been able to hide it."<sup>37</sup> Personally seeing the devastation of occupied lands and sharing in civilians' joy, like many intense aspects of war, overshadowed what little preparation propaganda provided.

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<sup>34</sup> Letter from Viktor P. Orlov to Petr A. Orlov via radio committee 30 October 1943. GARF Fond 6903 Opis 9 Delo 608 List 198.

<sup>35</sup> In 1943, photos of dead women, children, and oldsters, usually in open trenches or ruined villages, began to accompany the vivid textual descriptions of German atrocities and violence present in *Krasnaia Zvezda* since early 1942.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Leonid N. Byzov to his mother 30 October 1943. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 125 List 78.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Vekiamin Vokhovskii to his girlfriend 10 February 1944. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 598 List 2.

Soldiers' experiences among the liberated population usually confirmed both official narratives of victimization and their own views of appropriate military and civilian roles. A mortar unit officer described a number of newly liberated villages in his letters home, and observed typical scenes of the survivors of the German occupation: "what joy on the faces of children, women, and oldsters in every liberated village!" Such villages did not lack male civilians entirely, but contained no fighting-age men. The teen boys they encountered, who were too young to serve when the war began, "more than anyone else, voluntarily asked to join our unit, in order to drive out and strike at the enemy with us."<sup>38</sup> In contrast, the suffering of women and children underscored the consequences of occupation: "It is difficult to see such images: An old woman sitting, around her are three small children and everyone is crying, crying. Such families are not unique, but are like the whole population of Ukraine."<sup>39</sup> Many Red Army men's experiences of liberation thus motivated them to continue fighting and reinforced their gendered view of the war effort, in which masculine fighters returned the victims of occupation to the feminine realm of the Soviet home front. Any men found on the wrong side of the divide quickly sought to assert their manliness and join the advancing liberators. To the extent that it superseded revenge as a motive, troops' understanding of liberation fit with the sense of being part of a masculine community of fighters.

Both liberation and revenge motives are significant as evidence of the limits of interaction between official rhetoric and soldiers' views of the war effort. Even when motivations and views of the enemy seemed to coincide, they differed in relative importance, and thus overall meaning. Their main point of convergence remained the masculine character of both duties, whether linked to Stalin's leadership or personal loss. Women consistently gained

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<sup>38</sup> Letter from Grigorii Kozhenkov to his wife 8 September 1943. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1417/15 Listy 3-4.

<sup>39</sup> Letter from Grigorii Kozhenkov to his wife 17 September 1943. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1417/15 List 8.

liberation, but never appeared to take up arms to liberate or avenge comrades. Stalin's inspiration or guidance in hero's actions, yet absence whenever women combatants received mention, further emphasized the gender divisions within the war effort and masculine conception of power. Revenge became a widespread motive among troops and norm in combat collectives in response to the recurring death of comrades. Concern for family did not disappear, but lost its preeminence for many soldiers, who began to express the importance of frontline bonds alongside family bonds in their letters. Women remained largely outside such groupings despite their growing presence at the front, and even when they filled combat roles. News about family and physical proximity to an occupied home region were the main reasons soldiers' might reorient their priorities from avenging comrades to liberating loved ones. Red Army troops expressed their desire for revenge much more frequently than a concern for national liberation, inverting the relationship presented in official rhetoric. Nevertheless, they accepted both as masculine duties to be fulfilled for the honor of their frontline groups and for Soviet women not engaged in combat.

### **Burying and honoring the dead**

Soldiers' deaths in combat received no shortage of glorification from soldier-specific propaganda from the outset of the invasion, but the practical task of frontline burial was another matter entirely. Troops began to create graves for their comrades: sometimes individual, sometimes mass, as circumstances at the front allowed. Alongside this improvised effort to show respect, funeral service and serious contemplation of the loss of their frontline brothers developed into a central element of frontline culture. Official rhetoric did not ignore the issue entirely after the Sacrificial Defender ideal faded away in late 1941. However, it focused only on the loss of the most decorated and exploit-accomplished heroes, whose memorialization

purportedly promoted future heroism. Meanwhile, practical treatment of the dead and wounded still suffered from deficiencies and required reform after two years of war.

Heroes and self-sacrificing exploits remained critical to both Red Army tactics and propaganda narratives after Stalingrad. The former value came through clearly in the personal report of General Rotmistrov to Marshall Zhukov after the battles around Prokhorovka in the Kursk salient. Explaining his army's victory, Rotmistrov concluded that: "The arms, armor, and accuracy of fire by German tanks were substantially better [than ours], and only the exceptional courage of our tank men and the greater number of our tank units' artillery deprived the enemy of the means to fully exploit the superiority of their tanks."<sup>40</sup> General Rotmistrov's assessment is particularly compelling because it lacked any self-serving interpretation of the sources of victory. Moreover, the need for individual heroics to tip the balance in what many military historians consider the Red Army's definitive victory in the course of the war, speaks to the enduring importance of heroic exploits in Red Army success.<sup>41</sup>

Dead and wounded heroes drove the propaganda discussion of burial and memorialization in 1943, before and after the summer's Kursk salient battles. The Red Army's fallen since 1918 and during the current war, explained *Krasnaia Zvezda*, "educate the soldiers of the Red Army and all Soviet people in the spirit of hatred of the German invaders and confidence in victory," but only when they are properly honored and their names burn with glory.<sup>42</sup> Such articles emphasized proper burial and memorial construction only for the most celebrated of fighters. Subsequent articles later in the year reiterated the theme of honoring

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<sup>40</sup> "Letter of commander of the 5<sup>th</sup> guards tank army Rotmistrov P.A. to Marshal Zhukov G.K., 20 August 1943. RTsKhDNI Fond 71 Opis 25 Delo 9027 Listy 1-5. Cited in Lev Lopukhovskii, ed. *Prokhorovka bez grifa sekretnosti* [Prokhorovka declassified] (Moscow, 2005), 598.

<sup>41</sup> Stalingrad proved a key psychological victory, but the authors place greater emphasis on Kursk as the crucial battle in the decisive second period of the war, because "it was the first time a German strategic offensive had been halted before it could break through enemy defenses." David Glantz and Jonathan House. *When Titans Clashed*. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995), 167.

<sup>42</sup> "The Glory of Fallen Warriors," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 1 April 1943, 3.

certain soldiers for propaganda purposes and ignoring others. Not only did “the motherland demand” such treatment for its heroes, but the propaganda value of memorializing and decorating fallen soldiers would boost the wounded friends of the fallen comrade.<sup>43</sup> The most important measure of worth in official rhetoric, Stalin’s fatherly care, applied most of all to heroes: “We know that the people will not forget the exploit of [their] son... our dear father Comrade Stalin will not leave us.”<sup>44</sup> Combined with fathers standing in to receive medals for fallen sons, Stalin chose his symbolic sons among the battle dead. Dead heroes retained their pride of place by earning not only medals, but Stalin’s personal approval, unlike those who fell without an exploit.

Personal burial may have emerged out of some level of necessity, as even Soviet officials complained that the Red Army “shows complete lack of concern for the corpses of the fallen. On the way from Kamensk in the Rostov oblast to Kharkov I came across many dead Red Army soldiers, whose corpses had been left lying for up to a fortnight by the roadside in mud, ditches and fields.”<sup>45</sup> President Kalinin himself affirmed, “I have written to the Chairmen of the Executive Committees of Soviets asking them to see to it that all common graves are put into proper order.”<sup>46</sup>

Red Army soldiers expressed their dedication to each other by first ensuring that dead comrades were secured for burial. While circumstances certainly prevented its realization, members of a combat collective strove to uphold the principles that “we never abandoned our

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<sup>43</sup> “The decoration of wounded and killed soldiers,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 10 July 1943, 1.

<sup>44</sup> The transfer of the orders of the Patriotic war to killed warriors’ families” *Krasnaia Zvezda* 16 October 1943, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Letter from political officer N.M. Petrenko to the Main Political Administration of the Red Army, October 1943, quoted in Edward Acton and Tom Stableford, *The Soviet Union: A Documentary History* Vol. 2 (Exeter, 2007), 140-141.

<sup>46</sup> M.I. Kalinin, “Speech at a discussion with agitators working at the front,” April 28, 1943, in *O Kommunisticheskom Vospitanii i voinskom dolge* [On Communist Education and Soldiers’ Duty] (Moscow: Partizdat, 1962), 581-582.

wounded or killed.”<sup>47</sup> Frontline culture valued reciprocity in most aspects surrounding danger and hardship, and recovery of the dead and wounded figured prominently among those expectations. The slowly improving proficiency of auxiliary services often appeared unworthy of the task of caring for comrades, an infantry scout learned firsthand: “there was no need for them to risk their lives for me: there were orderlies specially detailed to pick up the wounded and take them to the medical battalion. But my comrades did not have much faith in them, and decided to do the job themselves.”<sup>48</sup> Such dedication to each other revealed the strength of loyalty within combat collectives, but also reflected their exclusive character: troops judged the dispatch of non-combatant orderlies as a dereliction of their duty to one of their own, and uncertain to succeed, given the perceived weaknesses of non-combatant servicemen. In some cases, burial involved a combat operation, as an infantry squad leader recalled: “We buried our comrades on the battlefield. Two of them, Panichev and Endrikhin, were my good friends. ... Barely having left the village, we faced off with the Germans, [who were] trying to encircle us.”<sup>49</sup> Such efforts emphasized soldiers’ willingness to risk their immediate personal safety in order to ensure their dead comrades received a proper burial. Whether dead or simply wounded, comrades sought to preserve each other as a personal obligation that could not be left to others.

Frontline troops viewed a formal burial service as an honor owed to all fallen comrades, irrespective of their medal-worthiness of final acts in battle. The rituals that surrounded comrades’ deaths held important emotional value for survivors. The burial of a comrade followed a pattern, and involved all of his fellows:

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<sup>47</sup> Recollections of Vladimir M. Zimakov in *Red Army Infantrymen Remember the Great Patriotic War*, ed. Artem Drabkin (Bloomington: Authorhouse, 2009), 288.

<sup>48</sup> Mukhamet Shayakhmetov, *The Silent Steppe* (New York: Overlook/Rookery, 2006), 297.

<sup>49</sup> Recollections of Mikhail Chernomordik in *Ia dralsia s pantservaffe* [We fought against the Panzer forces] ed. Artem Drabkin (Moscow: Iauza, 2007), 300.

If there were time, we dressed the body in clean underwear and uniform. We would wrap deceased tankers in piece of tank tarpaulin, and infantry soldiers, as a rule, in their own greatcoats. We lined the bottom of the grave with pine boughs or straw or whatever was available. We carefully lowered the body into the excavated grave, being attentive always to inter from west to east [head west, feet east]. We did not use caskets. Accompanied by a volley of rifle fire or main-gun salvos, we threw the dirt in on top of our comrade and then we installed a simple pyramid with a star. Right there, at the fresh grave, we drank our daily ration of a hundred grams of vodka, in memory of the fallen. And then we returned to battle.<sup>50</sup>

As a group process, burial could bond survivors closer. While funerals reminded men of their own mortality, they were also a time to reflect on how much they had survived, and the nature of their friendship. An infantryman recalled how “I felt especially sorry for him for some reason. Maybe because I did not make it to warn him, or because the last minutes of his life passed right there in front of me. I also could not understand his last words. ...I saw a lot of death in the war, but that death I remembered especially.”<sup>51</sup> Unlike official rhetoric, troops considered honoring their dead to be a fundamentally local and front specific practice: “We had to write all of their data [from their dog tag], and there was a superstition – when you finished writing, it meant that you’d killed him.”<sup>52</sup> There was little to be learned or emulated, since it was survival skills, not heroic death, that replacement troops needed to learn. The surrogate family of the combat collective had a duty to perform, which formed part of their sense of brotherhood and collective affiliation

Amidst these renewed efforts to promote heroism in battle, significant numbers of Red Army soldiers finally began to discuss the subject in 1943. Writing about fallen comrades, troops did not apply the term to every man they lost, but employed a consistent definition of what constituted a heroic death. However, this was the essentially the only written context in

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<sup>50</sup> Dmitriy Loza, *Fighting for the Soviet Motherland* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 210.

<sup>51</sup> Aleksandr V. Pyl'tsyn, *Shtrafnoi Udar* [Penalty Strike] (Moscow: Znanie, 2003), 111.

<sup>52</sup> Recollections of Aleksandr V. Rogachev in Drabkin (2007), 341-342.

which they used the term, as it failed to appear in either letters home or letters sent to each other via the radio.<sup>53</sup> Soldiers did not always describe their brothers-in-arms as heroes, even when those deaths demanded revenge. The primary reason why Red Army fighters applied the term hero, in addition to vowing revenge, was that the letter writer personally witnessed his comrade's death, rather than writing because of their friendship alone. In a typical condolence letter of this type, one pilot explained what he saw: "during a dive bombing run against a tank column near the city of Nevel' was badly hit by a tank and crashed his burning plane into the mass of the column."<sup>54</sup> Another soldier described his comrades' final movements in battle before dying heroically, and explained: "I left the battle wounded and wrote this letter according to his wishes."<sup>55</sup> Such personal experiences before a comrade's death stand out as the distinguishing element of letters that acknowledged fellow soldiers as heroes, although the term failed to replace vows of revenge in either individual letters or as an expression of brotherhood.

A central element to soldiers' definition of heroism was a comrade's willingness to take a risk for the good of his men. An artillerist emphasized this when he explained his commander's heroic death during an encirclement battle at Stalingrad: "we were together in the battery when he decided to counter-attack against the larger number of German tanks using anti-tank rifles and several grenades. He alone stood to use the anti-tank weapons and I gave him ammunition. Only his resistance gave [the rest of] us a chance to stay alive."<sup>56</sup> Selflessness and concern for comrades figured prominently in such accounts, as one fighter explained how "his best fighting friend" reacted to being mortally wounded in fighting off a tank assault: "He spoke little and

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<sup>53</sup> Communicating with comrades transferred to other units, in hospital, or in junior officer training though the radio broadcast of letters from the front was the other main use of the service, after letters to displaced family members.

<sup>54</sup> Letter from Iu. Alferov to brother of Vladimir Ia. Shamrai 14 November 1943. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 16 List 6.

<sup>55</sup> Letter from Vasilii Mikhailin to wife of Aleksandr A. Savchik 3 August 1943. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 270 List 3.

<sup>56</sup> Letter from Anatolii to wife of Ivan V. Bulatov 20 April 1943. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 242 List 12.



when I asked him how he was feeling, he answered that it was nothing and added ‘take this ammunition for your machine gun, you’ll need them, and I will only leave them behind.’”<sup>57</sup>

While the letter focused on the aftermath of his exploit, it shows the centrality of putting comrades before oneself to soldiers’ definition of heroism. In each of these cases, comrades saw sacrifice for each other as heroic, mirroring their determination to fight and kill the enemy to avenge each other.

Burial rituals were not universal at the front, and those who died dishonorably received little attention or commemoration. In fact, larger numbers of soldiers received no such commemoration later in the war, because “the highest losses were always among the green, untried soldiers.”<sup>58</sup> The difference appears clearly in a artilleryman’s memoir treatment of losses in two consecutive battles after the Kursk operation. The loss of unknown replacements barely received mention: “the Germans had destroyed two self-propelled guns from our regiment and a heavy one from Gromov’s regiment.” In contrast, lost comrades appeared in full. “Guys on my old crew had been killed: the gun-layer Valeriy Korolev, the driver Vanya, Gerasimov, and the gun-loader Kolya Sviridov. Some of the vehicle commanders had died too: among them Sasha Minin, Mikolay Samoilov, and Vanya Tomin,” while the death of his closest friend among them prompted “bitter grief.”<sup>59</sup> Such a reaction fit the dynamics of small group cohesion, as the new men had not survived long enough to earn equal status in their unit’s combat collective, and their deaths therefore provoked no personal feelings of loss among survivors.

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<sup>57</sup> Letter from M. Rybakov to wife of Sergei A. Aksenovskii April 1943. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 576 List 7.

<sup>58</sup> Ivan Iakushin, *On the Roads of War* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2005), 94.

<sup>59</sup> Krysov, 164, 180-181.

The other type of loss that warranted no commemoration or revenge from veterans was death through incompetence or carelessness. Unsurprisingly, this often involved replacement troops, as a machine-gunner observed while being redeployed after Kursk:

While we were on the way [to the front], about 20 men from our train died – everywhere around us was filled with landmines. One character, a sailor, detached a bounding mine. How did he manage it?! What a blockhead! A bunch of young inexperienced onlookers gathered around him: “Look here,” he said, “it will jump up, I’ll catch it and it won’t explode.” It jumped up and exploded. His arm was torn off and intestines fell out.<sup>60</sup>

Such incidents were common, if less preventable, even in later stages of the war, since replacements joined the ranks even in 1945. Death from carelessness or incompetence, when combat inevitably took men who fought well and had saved their comrades in the past, was not something Red Army fighters took time to mourn. Such a death among replacements, rather than due to enemy action, merited less concern still. Soldiers considered such deaths neither tragic nor a real loss to their unit, unless they harmed fighters within the combat collective (as “rear rats” were sometimes accused of doing). Fighting men had to earn the right to be mourned and avenged by comrades, and those died before doing so faded away namelessly.

Women’s deaths proved noteworthy for reasons quite separate from those of male comrades. The significance of the loss of a woman, whether or not she was a combatant, had little to do with her success in her frontline role. As an artilleryman recalled, “I didn’t even have time to shout ‘Get down!’ to her, when she was hit and fell... It was painful to see this cute girl, who was only about 18 years of age, and my heart was breaking over the injustice of what had just happened – having had no time to live her own life fully.”<sup>61</sup> An infantry sergeant remembered a similar reaction among his comrades:

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<sup>60</sup> Recollections of Zimakov in Drabkin (2009), 285.

<sup>61</sup> Krysov, 184.

“Natasha from Krasnaia Presnia,” who was generally considered the best-looking of all the female snipers, slipped as she was descending a slope down into the trenches and tumbled downward. Just before she reached the trench, a burst of automatic fire caught her. A bullet penetrated her right shoulder and buried itself in her chest. Everyone turned out for her funeral. Her friends sobbed without embarrassment. We all tried our best to comfort them. I can recall no other occasion at the front when anyone offered someone else so much consolation. They loved Natasha in the team, praised her beauty, and thought she had a promising future in the movies or the theater. The young woman herself was thinking about something completely different; she dreamed of getting married and quickly having three children.<sup>62</sup>

In typical fashion, each woman’s death garnered significant attention in spite of her carelessness in battle. Instead, men focused on the pleasing appearance of the deceased and the tragedy of their postwar life lost. There was no discussion of comradeship, fighting skills, or revenge. There was no sense of a shared bond of hardship, vulnerability, and loss, but of injustice, as if a woman’s death ought not to happen, even in wartime, and thus touched servicemen who lacked a personal connection to the deceased. Reactions to women’s deaths resembled the loss of loved ones in the rear more than the mourning of male comrades.

Frontline burial remained a problem for military officials and an uncertain honor for soldiers due to the circumstances of war. The uncertainty of burial opportunities changed somewhat after Stalingrad, as the Red Army faced fewer reversals, but large scale defeats, especially around Leningrad and Kharkov, still took place. While frontline propaganda began to treat burial as the honor of select heroes who receive Stalin’s personal attention, common soldiers’ treatment had scarcely improved. The logistical failing as much as symbolic ones prompted fighting men to take action. Their ceremonies, complete with eulogies, tears, and even shifts of sentry duty while still in danger, further distinguished front culture and front experience from soldiers’ families in the rear. Families could not participate alongside comrades at their relatives’ funerals, which increased soldiers’ sense of isolation from home at the same time it

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<sup>62</sup> Boris Gorbachevsky, *Through the Maelstrom* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 339.

strengthened their comradely bonds. The simple feeling that they might soon join their comrades limited any desire to celebrate the tactical gains of a heroic death. Like revenge, fighting men considered burial a masculine duty, which only their fellow combatants could ask of each other or carry out.

### **Hierarchy in the national family of fighters**

Amidst the continued celebration of heroic exploits and exhortation to liberate more territory, paternal themes regained importance in official rhetoric after Stalingrad. The role of non-Slavic nationalities in the war effort appeared through the framework of Stalin's paternal care for the Soviet people. Stalin's gifts provided all the motivation they needed to sacrifice for the war effort, but this negatively distinguished them from Slavic troops fighting to liberate their homes and families. Red Army fighters showed no interest in paternal leadership from their officers, and judged the latter according to their own, fraternal masculine norms of frontline conduct. Their reaction to non-Slavic soldiers in their ranks came down to a single, utilitarian criterion: language skill.

After Stalingrad, *Krasnaia Zvezda* articles continued to promote fatherly care as a priority, asking rhetorically: "If a commander is not interested in what his soldiers eat, what kind of foodstuffs his unit has, then how is he a commander, how is he a father to his troops?"<sup>63</sup> A January 1943 editorial explained that "soldiers are the best sons of the people," and officers "are required to pay daily attention to every question of life and living conditions, and more than ever, provide the fatherly care of a commander to soldiers," which was ultimately "care for the motherland, care for victory."<sup>64</sup> Fatherly care emerged as an essential duty for officers to provide to their men around midyear. This change in approach took place because "Comrade

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<sup>63</sup> "Care for the living conditions and nourishment of soldiers like Suvorov did," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 29 May 1943, 1.

<sup>64</sup> "Fatherly care for soldiers," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 14 January 1943, 1.

Stalin requires from all of our commanders, that they carry out the best traditions of the Russian army, and learn from Suvorov and Kutuzov how to act in a fatherly way to care for soldiers' needs."<sup>65</sup> The change in approach thus reflected apparent past success, creeping promotion of Russian national symbols, and gradual improvements in Soviet logistics and lend-lease aid. Into 1944, editorials continued to explain: "the daily care of a commander for the needs of his soldiers – that is care about heroes, who have travelled the glorious path from the Volga to the Prut, it is care about victory."<sup>66</sup> The recurring language of fathers and sons within units borrowed from the generational masculine duty rhetoric of late 1942, but shifted focus to the duty of officer-fathers to play a tutelary role in their units.

Beyond Stalin's role as a father for officers to emulate, he appeared more and more in official rhetoric as a national father of the Soviet people, including its diverse nationalities. Stalin brought unity, as President Kalinin explained: "Comrade Stalin, whose own effort in establishing the strength of the Soviet Union has been so great in itself, was also able to fuse into one all the force of the community, to inspire them and direct them towards the main and most essential task of the moment: the defense of the Soviet State against the German Fascist bandits."<sup>67</sup> His national and military roles coincided, and were credited with inspiring all the national republics' contributions to the war effort. However, not all peoples contributed equally, especially regarding their relative importance in front and rear. The feminine motive of benefits, sometimes expressed as thanks to Stalin "for your personal care for the peoples of Kazakhstan," singled out certain nations as passive, dependent, and not seriously fighting for revenge against the fascist invader or liberation of Soviet lands.<sup>68</sup> Alongside this feminine, non-combat role, the

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<sup>65</sup> "Care about the daily life and nourishment of soldiers like Suvorov would," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 29 May 1934, 1.

<sup>66</sup> "Care for soldiers," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 6 April 1944, 1.

<sup>67</sup> M.I. Kalinin, *The Soviet President Speaks* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1945), 72.

<sup>68</sup> "To Comrade Stalin," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 8 June 1943, 1.

Tatar people pledged to Stalin to “honorably fulfill our duty before the fatherland and the front,” suggesting that they only assisted the front, without sending Tatar men to fight directly.<sup>69</sup> Their treatment was typical of that received by non-Slavic peoples, as women and civilians represented them first and foremost in frontline propaganda. Though unidentified as such, they seemed to figure into the national hierarchy as little sisters to the Russian “elder brother”<sup>70</sup> Much like Slavic Soviet women combatants when the press first covered them in 1942, other nationalities’ fighting men did not share the revenge and liberation motives of soldier heroes in official rhetoric. These associations provided troops with a message of national hierarchy based on value to the war effort, in which non-Slavs appeared as feminine nations, and their few fighting men as second rank heroes.

Discipline problems spiked alongside non-Slavic replacement troops’ numbers in the Red Army. They posed a new challenge to political workers, since existing motives and ideals appeared to be ineffective. In response, a report on the “Liquidation of errors in party-political work in the Red Army” criticized typical problems, including how “Kabardians and Uzbeks gathered in groups and shared with each other in tobacco, but if they were asked to share tobacco with a Russian, they refused.”<sup>71</sup> Negative reinforcement altered agitation policy little, and kept the focus on nationalities’ failings. In a similar way, *Krasnaia Zvezda* diminished the significance of non-Slavic troops’ combat wounds when it noted “especially greater attention is required to deal with the wounded soldiers and commanders of non-Russian nationalities” after highlighting the brave recovery of various Russian soldiers and even patriotic civilians wounded when they fought back against the Germans.<sup>72</sup> Such efforts produced poor initial results, but

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 25 July 1943, 1.

<sup>70</sup> M.I. Kalinin, *On Communist Education* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1950), 330.

<sup>71</sup> RGASPI Fond 17 Opis 125 Delo 85 List 2.

<sup>72</sup> “Political work among the wounded,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 8 April 1943, 3.

provided Red Army troops with an unambiguous assessment of the relative combat roles, and thus masculine status, of the various nationalities that Stalin had called to serve.

The growing number of non-Slavic soldiers in the Red Army after Stalingrad eventually prompted reform. A central directive to this end was the “publication in thirteen languages of hundreds of mobilization pamphlets, leaflets, and slogans in multi-million print run. Publishing dozens of front and army newspapers, and also many combat leaflets in the languages of Non-Russian nationalities.” Likewise, officials took concrete measures to improve morale, such as facilitating “how soldiers of non-Russian nationalities maintain their correspondence with home, if they are getting letters and sending answers.”<sup>73</sup> These reforms ostensibly sought to ensure all troops felt motivated and fought effectively, but Red Army officials also believed that political work should further integrate non-Slavic soldiers with other Soviet peoples, because “the great trouble that befell the peoples of our country united them all into a single brotherly family... blood on the field of battle made eternal the great friendship of the peoples of the Soviet Union.”<sup>74</sup> Efforts to deal with the perceived problem that “soldiers of non-Russian nationalities are defective as fighters” also acknowledged and addressed real “manifestations of chauvinism” in political work along with other army-wide reforms.<sup>75</sup> However, existing ideas and priorities in Red Army political work regarding Slavic soldiers’ centrality to the war effort, and the decline in mobilization demands for non-Slavic troops’ capabilities limited the pursuit of this aim.

Civilian women appeared as the main actors in national republics’ contributions to the war effort, and although heroes and medal winners merited a greater level attention than before, a clear hierarchy emerged in coverage of the multi-national war effort. Indeed, the home front

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<sup>73</sup> “To strengthen in every way the fighting friendship of the peoples of the USSR” RGASPI Fond 88 Opis 1 Delo 965 Listy 17-18.

<sup>74</sup> “Military order and tasks of political workers” RGASPI Fond 386 Opis 1 Delo 18 List 8.

<sup>75</sup> RGASPI Fond 88 Opis 1 Delo 967 Listy 5-6.

was the most common site of non-Slavic nationalities' appearances in propaganda. In such articles, women appeared as the main representatives of the home front, "in these days, when our brothers, husbands, and fathers, bravely and selflessly, not sparing their own lives, fight the Germans and their henchmen, all of us, remaining in the rear, are helping you beat out the enemy with our dedicated labor."<sup>76</sup> These women, and the nations they represented, contributed to the war effort but remained far removed from the front: "Uzbekistan is the deep rear of our fatherland, but here with great effort and exertion people are working on military tasks, knowing that the fatherland needs their labor."<sup>77</sup> Civilian visits to the front further established the place of non-Slavic nationalities in the war effort, as one article detailed how "the delegation of Kazakh workers...brought soldier and officer gifts, care packages, and letters."<sup>78</sup> Unlike Slavic soldiers, other Soviet nationalities appeared most commonly as non-combatants, as either women or a civilian people (*Narod*), separating them from the manliest and most important role of fighter.

In some ways reminiscent of their propaganda role in the First World War, non-Slavic women appeared at the front in soldier specific propaganda alongside mentions of fighting men displaying cowardice.<sup>79</sup> The article "Heroine-machine-gunner Manshuk Mametova" narrated how "a wounded woman machine-gunner shifted her position and again opened fire on the enemy" allowing male soldiers to storm an enemy position.<sup>80</sup> While she killed no one, a Kazakh woman fighting alongside Slavic men sent a message about the Kazakh peoples' role in the war effort. While Slavic women appeared in combat, they were a small number compared to Slavic men, while Mametova served as a representative of Kazakh battle success, since so few of her

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<sup>76</sup> "A letter from the Turkmen people to Turkmen soldiers at the front," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 16 April 1943, 3.

<sup>77</sup> "By the mountains of Farkhad," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 15 October 1943, 4.

<sup>78</sup> "Heroic Division," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 4 December 1943, 2.

<sup>79</sup> On women's shaming role in 1917, see Melissa K. Stockdale, "'My Death for the Motherland is Happiness': Women, Patriotism, and Soldiering in Russia's Great War, 1914-1917," *American Historical Review* 109 no. 1 (2004).

<sup>80</sup> "Heroine-machine-gunner Manshuk Mametova," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 4 March 1944, 3.



people appeared in front propaganda at all. Articles featuring men and women confirmed this message. In “Husband and Wife,” a Kirgizh couple both served at the front, he as a soldier, and she as a medic. In an improbable scenario, they meet at the front, but she rescues him after he is wounded, saying “Light of my eyes, flower of my soul, joy of my heart, look at your Zeinab and just speak to her.”<sup>81</sup> Such a clear inversion of Slavic combatants as saviors of women in front coverage signaled a serious deficiency in a given nation’s contribution to the military facet of the war effort. In the context of war coverage and discussion of hierarchy through family metaphors, Central Asian peoples ranked as more feminine, and their men abject according to the standards depicted used Slavic fighters in soldier specific propaganda.

*Krasnaia Zvezda* actually presented soldiers with a hierarchy of national masculinity and contributions to the war effort, which emphasized the predominance of Slavic and Russian fighters and heroes. The Russian people’s place at the top of the hierarchy received frequent reinforcement in official rhetoric. Articles titled “The great traditions of the Russian people,” “Russian strength,” and “A heroic people, a warrior people” made clear that “the Russian people since ancient times were predisposed and loved to wage war.”<sup>82</sup> The link between masculinity and national fighting ability appeared in articles that explained the “role of the Russian people as the older brother in the family of nations of the USSR,” was that of combatant, in which “we, Russians, must grit our teeth, tense our muscles, and gather all our will and energy to fight.”<sup>83</sup> The Russian people and Russian soldiers thus provided an example to the “children of the great family of nationalities as warriors of the country going to battle for their homeland.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> “Husband and Wife,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 15 June 1943, 4.

<sup>82</sup> “A heroic people, a warrior people,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 27 January 1944, 1.

<sup>83</sup> “For the motherland!” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 6 July 1943, 1, and “Errors in newspapers for non-Russian soldiers,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 24 December 1943, 3.

<sup>84</sup> “For the motherland!” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 6 July 1943, 1.

Russians' preeminence helped define the position of lesser members in the hierarchy of the multinational fighting brotherhood that made up the Red Army, measured by the closeness of each peoples' relationship to the Russian and the duration of their connection. Rather than proximity alone, a history of fighting together meant more time to learn from the Russian martial tradition and acquire the masculine and soldierly traits that distinguished members of the Soviet fighting brotherhood. Ukrainian fighters were logically in the penultimate position of this hierarchy, which the celebration of seventeenth century hero Bogdan Khmel'nitskii emphasized: "intimate union of two brother peoples has since then become a threat to the enemies of the Ukrainians and Russians."<sup>85</sup> Adding "valorous sons" and "legendary sons" to the ranks of Red Army ensured the status of "their Belorussian brothers," since the occupation of most of the Belorussian SSR limited the possibilities for celebrating a historical military relationship.<sup>86</sup> Marked as the most heroic of Caucasian and non-Slavic nations, Georgia could boast this prerequisite to military success, because "for the past hundred years the sons of the Georgian people fought together with the Russians for their shared homeland and shared fate. Even in the Patriotic war of 1812, the Georgian people gave the Russian army ... brave officers and courageous soldiers."<sup>87</sup> Heroic exploits in such articles underscored that alongside support from the rear, these more senior nationalities provided capable fighters to the war effort.

Red Army fighters found little value in officers' efforts to exhibit paternal qualities after Stalingrad or at any point in the war. Instead, they valued officers who cared for their men's survival. An infantryman who fought to Berlin explained his distaste for officers who "were able

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<sup>85</sup> "Together with the brother Russian people," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 15 October 1943, 2.

<sup>86</sup> "The military appeal of Belorussian Warriors," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 8 August 1943, 1.

<sup>87</sup> "A letter from Georgian fighters to the workers of Georgia," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 16 May 1943, 2.

to send rashly their detachments toward a certain death without hesitation.”<sup>88</sup> Another infantryman posed a rhetorical question about officers’ priorities: “Were there times when it was clear after our first effort to storm the [enemy] position that we wouldn’t be able to capture the collective farm, but the commander of the regiment or division interfered and took soldiers to the start line and saved a hundred lives? No, they had orders.”<sup>89</sup> For troops who judged others according to their combat collectives’ norms of shared sacrifice and hardship, such officer did not deserve respect. Leadership meant leading men into battle and fighting with them. A Georgian fighter explained how he and his comrades viewed political officers who did not fight: “We called them ‘popes’. I did not think they were necessary. I myself understood what kind of soldiers I served with, and what kind of spirit they had.”<sup>90</sup> Such officers violated men’s expectations of frontline behavior and lost respect because they refused to share in the danger that the rank and file could scarcely avoid. Their formal power endured, but their relationship with their subordinates could extend no further without a dramatic change in their relationship to combat, not the food and rest improvements official rhetoric recommended.

The troops saw no more merit in the hierarchy of national war contributions that appeared in official rhetoric after Stalingrad. Concerned with battle merit, they judged replacements by their conduct at the front and especially in combat. The only limit to this emerged as language skill. Skill had been a key issue in prewar conflicts between men and women workers, but at the front, language skill provided a fundamental barrier to comradeship.<sup>91</sup> Kazakh infantryman remembered how, early in the mobilization process, “to deal with the language problem at least,

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<sup>88</sup> Recollections of Pavel B Vinnik in Drabkin (2009), 246.

<sup>89</sup> Recollections of Elia G. Gekhtman in *Tankisti “My pogibali, sgorali”* [Tankers “We killed, burned”], ed. Artem Drabkin, (Moscow: Iauza, 2012), 222.

<sup>90</sup> Recollections of Nikolai I. Charashvili in Drabkin (2012), 281.

<sup>91</sup> On skill in the civilian workplace, see Wendy Goldman, *Women at the Gates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 214.

the regimental command appointed half a dozen young Russian-speakers, including myself, as section commanding officers. Nobody was concerned about what sort of leaders we would make or what we could teach the men: we were just glorified interpreters.”<sup>92</sup> Aside from the critical service they provided their co-nationals, knowledge of Russian removed the only barrier to acceptance for capable soldiers. The opposite was true for men who lacked Russian language skills. Such recruits faced isolation and ostracism, or at best pity, as Vasily Grossman observed on a troop train: “A soldier, an Uzbek, is singing loudly in Uzbekian [*sic*]. The whole carriage can hear him. The sounds seem absurd to our ears, and the words are unfamiliar. Red Army soldiers are listening to him attentively, with a caring and embarrassed expression. There isn’t a single grin or smile.”<sup>93</sup> While Slavic troops displayed obvious chauvinism about language learning, they usually included Russian speakers from the national republics. Skill could function as an individual attribute that trumped national stereotypes.

The revival of Stalin’s dual paternal role as father to Red Army troops and to the Soviet people highlighted how existing Soviet ideas adapted to wartime circumstances. Stalin’s relationship to the troops extended beyond leader, inspiration, and surrogate comrade to caring father, on which officers were to model their behavior. This change proved far less drastic than Stalin’s renewed role of national father, which accompanied a gendered hierarchy of peoples at war as much as multi-national unity. The feminized non-Slavic nationalities’ sudden prominence in frontline propaganda coincided with their mass entry into the ranks and ensuing disciplinary problems. Heroes were few among them, and female heroes seemed to be a mockery as much as showcase of their wartime role. Among the troops, each man could prove himself, if he spoke Russian, regardless of how his homeland appeared in the newspapers. Many

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<sup>92</sup> Shayakhmetov, 273

<sup>93</sup> Vasily Grossman, *A Writer at War* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 93.

among them failed to measure up, but they joined the ranks of Slavs and Russians in the rear that had no language difficulties. Although their respective barriers are difficult to compare, Russian-speaking non-Slavs seem to have been far more successful entrants into combat collectives than Slavic women, especially given the Red Army's Russian majority.

### **Conclusion**

The year following Stalingrad provided few radical changes to the Red Army's rank and file. Propaganda narratives and soldiers' view of the most notable change, an influx of non-Slavic soldiers, challenges existing scholarship on the Soviet national question during the war. The post-Stalingrad period saw both the introduction and high water mark of non-Slavic soldiers' visibility in soldier-specific propaganda, which suggests a much more complicated policy process than is possible with the existing idea of a linear "wartime line" on the national elements of Soviet culture, operating separately from wartime practice.<sup>94</sup> Despite their sudden prominence, the feminine valence of most coverage of non-Slavic peoples in *Krasnaia Zvezda* suggests official dissatisfaction with their overall military performance. A leading scholar of Central Asia military forces has assessed the Communist Party's agitation about military service and national defense as having been highly effective in Central Asia in the years leading up to the war.<sup>95</sup> However, the problems of discipline and motivation that purportedly prompted a dramatic increase in focus on non-Slavic demonstrates that non-Slavic soldiers were not prepared for military service, at least not on the scale that the military officials demanded. The sudden propaganda focus on non-Slavic contributions and interest in improving political work among non-Slavs suggests the need to reexamine the universal implications of growing wartime

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<sup>94</sup> David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 120-121.

<sup>95</sup> Erica Marat, *The Military and the State in Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2009), 29-32.

Russianization of priorities and narratives in the historical profession.<sup>96</sup> Among Russian soldiers, the primacy of practical language skill and military performance capabilities reveals no rising tide of national chauvinism or even national pride; even if the Red Army's prevailing language requirements served Russians and Slavs before other Soviet peoples.

Soldiers' overwhelming interest in burials and revenge suggests a far less optimistic mood among Red Army troops than some scholars have asserted.<sup>97</sup> This discrepancy in soldiers' mood is significant because it reveals a more complex picture of the post-Stalingrad landscape than other studies have identified. Specifically, official rhetoric presented sober themes, such as the burial of heroes and the unsatisfied need to liberate millions of Soviet citizens from captivity. Heroes remained central to this process, despite the gradual increase in Red Army forces' mobility and the firepower of heavy weaponry. Moreover, official rhetoric sought to direct officers to provide for their men's needs and policymakers undertook a massive campaign to translate agitation materials from Russian into other Soviet languages. Neither effort stands out as a marker of restored confidence and overwhelming superiority over the enemy.

Both liberation and revenge were motivations rooted in loss, and much danger and hard fighting remained before land or people were recovered. Convergence between official and soldiers' motives remained limited, even when both included liberation, revenge, and brotherhood, which reflected the power that frontline circumstances had over soldiers' motives. Witnessing comrades' deaths in battle or seeing the ruins of home regions trumped the macro-level objectives that propaganda heroes pursued. Soldiers displayed no greater receptivity to

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<sup>96</sup> For the connections between wartime events and propaganda and debates about priorities and narratives in the field of Soviet history, see Brandenberger, 130-132, 178-180.

<sup>97</sup> Catherine Merridale argues that a triumphal tone overtook propaganda after Stalingrad. Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War* (New York: Picador, 2006) 187-191, 228-231. For the argument that re-mechanization changed the image of the hero in 1943 to the "soldier-as-victor," see Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 213-215.

propaganda after Stalingrad than they had before it. The relative convergence of the two ideas of duty resulted from a shift in propaganda that brought official ideals closer to troops' existing motives to fight. The Red Army's victory at Stalingrad prompted change, as other major battles had, but failed to produce a distinct turning point in frontline culture.

## CHAPTER 5

### LOVING AND LUSTING: THE PERILS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF CONQUEST, 1944-1945

As spring gave way to summer in 1944, the Red Army finally enjoyed several advantages after three years of desperate fighting. For the first time in the war, Red Army commanders could dictate where and when summer campaigns would take place, building on the liberation of the Leningrad region, Odessa, and the Crimea in winter and spring operations. The Red Army also achieved a permanent superiority in size and equipment compared to its adversary. The Normandy landings in June marked the overdue opening of a true second front against Germany, in which Allied casualties rates actually surpassed Soviet totals, if only for those three months.<sup>1</sup> These factors resulted in a Red Army summer offensive that began by driving the Germans off Soviet territory in certain sectors, and finished entirely beyond the 1940 frontiers.

However, the success of the Red Army's liberating drive brought with it new challenges in propaganda and political work, and prompted soldiers to reconsider their expectations and opinions. How to maintain motivation, morale, and discipline once war continued after the liberation of Soviet territory emerged as a critical issue. For many soldiers, liberation revived earlier divisions between notions of collective and individual duty, and their connection to changing official war aims. Frontline depictions and perceptions of women also evolved along with the new strategic context and the peak in women entering the Red Army. Encounters with foreign territories and populations proved particularly jarring after engaging a generally welcoming Soviet population since 1941.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From the D-day landings to the liberation of Paris, Allied losses and French civilian casualties briefly reached Eastern Front levels. Antony Beevor, *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2009), 522.

<sup>2</sup> Not all populations welcomed the Red Army, as in formerly Polish Western Ukraine, where nationalist partisans mortally wounded Red Army General Vatutin in February 1944. Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 280.



The defense and liberation of the Soviet people had appeared as gendered motives for national mobilization and sacrifice from the outset of the German invasion. The centrality of liberation as a core propaganda goal of the war effort became clear when propagandists tried to preserve it by emphasizing the micro-liberation of Soviet citizens from captivity on foreign soil. Nevertheless, the gendered subjectivities soldiers expressed in their personal and public writings shifted in response to the transformation of liberation from a goal to an accomplishment. Soldiers reevaluated the longstanding tension between domestic and military demands when they left Soviet territory. These reflections involved their views of their comrades, loved ones, and the enemy, as well as expressions of the hatred, fear, joy, and pride they experienced as the war entered its final stages. After the onset of liberation, official rhetoric included new gendered depictions of the foreign terrain of combat, the altered status of the Soviet home front, and the role of Soviet power in both realms. New heroic ideals, both masculine and feminine, emerged to highlight the different ways in which the Soviet people could best fulfill their wartime duty and would be commemorated in victory. Among the troops, greater opportunities for intimate contact with foreign and Soviet women revealed the overlap between violence and sexuality in frontline culture and soldierly masculinity.

An examination of these subjectivities in contrast to the gender scripts of official rhetoric from the 1930s and Russian Civil War also reveals the capacity for soldiers to influence the propaganda directed at them, even after the cultural “breathing space” created by the mortal danger of Nazi subjugation had passed. Elements of prewar propaganda and policy returned in 1944, including Joseph Stalin’s omnipresent leadership role, and Soviet pronatalism.<sup>3</sup> However, the relationship between the 1940s war effort and the 1930s social and political order that victory

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<sup>3</sup> On prewar culture, see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), especially 114-141. On family policy, see Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 296-335.

would restore remained complex. I argue that this revival in frontline propaganda remained incomplete due to the need to respond to unanticipated changes in the military situation and soldiers' actions after liberation. The continued incongruity of official ideals and soldiers' values after liberation reveals a rise in alternative subjectivities at the front as victory grew near, an intensification of masculine hierarchy and expressions of superiority over women in the war effort, and the emergence of a cultural and moral context for the Red Army's mass rape of German women.

### **Conflicted loyalties after liberation**

The Red Army's foreign surroundings after liberation began to trump official rhetoric on the subject over the course of the summer of 1944. This turnaround in Soviet wartime fortunes, reversing the circumstances under which the war had been fought from its first hours, challenged the motives espoused in propaganda and the idea that the Soviet government guided active men to fight the war for passive women. Propaganda presented family differently in terms of national metaphor and individual examples. These changes sought to reconcile the clash of individual and collective loyalties that might arise for soldiers who thought of remaining with or returning to freed loved ones. Small changes took place in the hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity presented in frontline propaganda, in contrast to the momentous impact on soldiers' subjectivities, which again focused on domestic loyalties and individual affiliations. While Stalin's role as leader and symbolic father of male heroes received greater and greater attention, soldiers dreamed of their loved ones, rather than greater glory on foreign soil.

Frontline propaganda continued to embed notions of gender hierarchy in its narrative of the Red Army's liberating mission in the spring of 1944. *Krasnaia Zvezda* articles such as "Girls' Grief" unambiguously linked liberation with the restoration and protection of women's

honor, along with that of the country at large, but pushed it beyond territorial limits. After representing several tortured girls as universal Russian feminine figures as in the work of Pushkin and Turgenev, Ilya Ehrenburg asked Red Army men:

“Russian soldier, hero of Stalingrad, Kursk, Korsun, the Dniestr, are you listening to what the Germans do with the Russian girl Zina? If you know love, if you have a heart, you will not forgive this. ... Your honor will not allow you to refuse to defend these girls’ honor. ... You can save them. You must save them. They are our flowers, our birds, [and] our love. They await you, soldier of Russia.”<sup>4</sup>

Ehrenburg’s appeal rested on traditional associations of defending women’s honor as a masculine duty, of flowers, birds, and love as feminine, and challenged the heroes of such great battles on these terms, contrasting their strategic success with a more basic and personal duty that awaited fulfillment. Ehrenburg’s focus on passive feminine beauty and virtue evoked an almost chivalric martial ethic, but contributed to a new emphasis on fighting for Russian women beyond Soviet territory.

A secondary facet of such depictions of liberation in frontline propaganda acknowledged soldiers’ motivation to free their families from captivity. Originally published in the divisional newspaper *Suvorovets*, “A Mother’s Letter” appeared as the direct publication of a mother’s praise for the efforts of her five sons to liberate her, and the eventual success of her second youngest (along with his unit): “For two years we found ourselves under the yoke of the German occupiers. For two years I thought of my sons, and waited: and here they are, my sons - liberators!” The report from a special *Krasnaia Zvezda* correspondent, “Meeting on a Frontline Road,” depicts the personal motivation of Sgt. Ivan Grabovskii, who lived in Leningrad Oblast and fought to lift the siege of Leningrad. He returned home when the frontline passed through his town, and found a note from his sister that changed him as a fighter: “‘Red Army soldiers, the Germans have taken us. Come quickly, help us. Ania.’ That note explained everything. From that

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<sup>4</sup> “Girls’ Grief,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 15 April 1944, 3.

time forward Sgt. Grabovskii began to fight with even more fury.”<sup>5</sup> This fury brought him two medals and distinguished him among his comrades. Resting with his unit after a successful offensive, “on the road moved a throng of people” among whom he found his sister, after the Germans abandoned a group of civilians intended for deportation to Germany.<sup>6</sup> While these rare and rather improbable cases of direct liberation highlighted the importance of personal and local motives rarely present in frontline rhetoric, they operated within the same gender framework, replacing a universal Soviet girl passively awaiting liberation with a specific mother or sister doing the same.

Moreover, these articles were at best ambivalent about the importance of the familial motive as a sort of micro-liberation. In each case, they subordinated the achieved liberation of family members to the Red Army’s larger liberating mission, and concluded with a call to continue fighting to free those fellow female citizens still awaiting their liberators. Soon after reuniting with his sister, Sgt. Grabovskii addressed his comrades, providing the report’s conclusion: “Have you seen my sister? She is all of 19 years, but looks like an old woman. Her entire face is wrinkled, she walks like a hunchback. This is what the Germans are reducing the Russian people to. My mother and sister are free, but how many victims still await us.”<sup>7</sup> Along with the contrast of active and passive roles, the article emphasized how a soldier’s individual family circumstances changed nothing about his national duty. The nameless mother published in *Suvorovets* concluded her letter not with a personal message, but an order to her sons: “honorably and boldly fight for the liberation of the Motherland. Crush, hero-sons, the wild hordes of German invaders, to speed the liberation of [our] towns and cities from that scum.”<sup>8</sup> In

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<sup>5</sup> “Meeting on a Frontline Road,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 5 October 1944, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “A Mother’s Letter,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 5 October 1944, 3.

contrast to civilian publications, which emphasized personal and familial relationships throughout the war, such content marked a new theme in frontline propaganda, slightly elevating the significance of the family in the war effort, and only as victory appeared on the horizon.<sup>9</sup> However, the national family, and service or sacrifice for it, outweighed duty to soldiers' biological or local relations.

Beyond the gendering of roles of liberating soldier and liberated sister, frontline propaganda further distinguished between the active and passive response of Soviet citizens seeking liberation. In "Two Meetings," a single *Krasnaia Zvezda* article presented two contrasting cases of meetings of liberated family members. The first reunion was between siblings Liza and Stepan, where "Liza spent a long time telling her brother about her suffering and deprivations for three years of German occupation."<sup>10</sup> As in the other family liberation scenes presented above, the personal triumph of a soldier and his sister appeared as one example of the larger liberation effort. Stepan's comrades took inspiration from his sister's tragic story: "All the artillerymen of Koloskov's battery came to console the girl, [vowing] 'for the death of your mother, for all your suffering we will brutally make the Germans pay.'"<sup>11</sup> Such a response from his comrades suggested the universal power of women's suffering to motivate soldiers beyond family ties, and the passivity of women in this process, as sources of inspiration, but not active agents in the Red Army's mission of liberation.

The second meeting detailed in the article, between father and son Sviridov, provided a counter example of liberation. A lieutenant met his father at the front, and the latter explained his place in the Red Army ranks: "When the Germans broke into our city of Borisov, I joined the

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<sup>9</sup> Lisa Kirschenbaum, "'Our City, Our Hearths, Our Families': Local Loyalties and Private Life in Soviet World War II Propaganda" *Slavic Review* 59 no.4 (2000).

<sup>10</sup> "Two Meetings," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 19 October 1944, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

partisans... There I fought, and we liberated most of Byelorussia, I volunteered for the Red Army... but look at you, how well you've done for yourself. Already an officer!"<sup>12</sup> Rather than await his son's return with the Red Army, father Sviridov joined the liberation effort, and kept fighting once his city was free. Father Sviridov's example, in juxtaposition to that of Liza, presented its frontline audience with an unambiguous distinction between men's and women's roles in liberation, and in each case depicted all the men in a family as fighters. Such examples further reinforced the compatibility of universal and personal liberation motives for soldiers.

Ideal soldiers had multiple motives in these cases of extra-territorial liberation. However, specific heroic exploits provided two elements to distinguish the masculine role in liberation according to official rhetoric: Stalin and family. *Krasnaia Zvezda's* profile, "Hero of the Soviet Union Roman Smishchuk," approvingly reported how the experience of occupation, and a beating at the hands of a Romanian gendarme, caused "Hatred and a thirst for revenge to ignite in the chest of the collective farmer," unlike the disfigurement and disability suffered by Soviet women and girls described above. The 46-year old Smishchuk joined the Red Army after it reached his village, making liberation the beginning, rather than the end, of his time on the frontline. He entered the community of fighters and found himself transformed, as he explained: "I don't know where within me such rage came from. I had always been a quiet and peaceful man. But there [in battle], I did not remember myself, I only wanted one thing: to strike, to burn the reptiles." Smishchuk's exploit, destroying six German tanks with only grenades and Molotov cocktails, integrated him fully, so that his comrades: "Greeted the hero with cries of 'Ura'. They gave him friendly handshakes, thanked him, and hugged him." The Soviet leaders' congratulatory telegram explained that he showed his "love for the motherland and for the great

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Stalin, and also served “as a symbol of courage, fearlessness, and epic-hero strength”<sup>13</sup>

Smishchuk thus exemplified the qualities of the “Brother Liberator:” occupation strengthened him, Stalin inspired him, and he looked forward to advancing with his new comrades, not backward to home.

Frontline propaganda had long explained the nature of the community of fighters at the front in familial terms, and by mid-1944 revived the idea of a “great family” by presenting actual brothers to illustrate the relationship of individual families to the war effort.<sup>14</sup> *Krasnaia Zvezda* presented this link in “The Exploit of Aleksandr Matrosov’s Brother,” honoring not only the celebrated hero himself, but also the brother he inspired to fight through his sacrifice. The article explains that “In the heart of every son of the Soviet people live the Stalinist words: ‘The great exploit of comrade Matrosov must serve as an example of fighting bravery and heroism for every warrior of the Red Army.’”<sup>15</sup> Among thousands of other sons of the Soviet people, Vasili Matrosov still had a duty to fight, despite his family’s sacrifice of one son in the cause of victory.

A full discussion of ideal family contributions to the war effort appeared in the frontline newspaper *Za Rodiny* [*For the Motherland*], with the article “The Serovs, a Family of Patriots.” It profiled the Serov father and three sons, each of whom had served with distinction since the war’s outbreak, and celebrated a fourth son, who “following [his] father’s example, became a machine gunner and now fights at the front,” while “wife Nikolaia Gerasimovich and three daughters work in the collective farm fields.”<sup>16</sup> These contrasting types of patriotism and contributions to the war effort appear in sharp relief, applicable to both the biological unit and people as a whole. Discussions of women who “rendered invaluable services” extended beyond

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<sup>13</sup> “Hero of the Soviet Union Roman Smishchuk,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 14 June 1944, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Clark, 114-116

<sup>15</sup> Aleksandr Matrosov became one of the war’s most famous heroes, when he threw himself into the embrasure of an enemy machine gun position. “The Exploit of Aleksandr Matrosov’s Brother,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 23 May 1944, 2.

<sup>16</sup> “In the pages of Red Army newspapers,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 6 August 1944, 3.

mothers in the rear, but women remained secondary figures in the liberation effort led by frontline heroes.<sup>17</sup> The shift from Martyr Heroine to Victim-Helper emphasized femininity and reflected the optimistic and triumphal tone of Brother-Liberator discourse, but remained as disconnected from women's actual involvement at the front as it did from men's reaction to continued fighting.

For Red Army men, the final battles to liberate Soviet territory raised fundamental questions about the Soviet war effort that frontline propaganda failed to consider. While these new concerns registered somewhat in their letters home, a flood of petitions to the government mostly clearly expressed soldiers' sense that a decisive change had taken place. Red Army troops began petition the government after the Red Army had all but completed the liberation of Soviet territory during the summer of 1944.<sup>18</sup> The number of Red Army soldiers' petitions to the Supreme Soviet (usually addressed to President Kalinin, and rarely to Stalin) continued to increase monthly during the final year of the war. The most common requests were for assistance with early discharge or leave and more modest requests of material aid or preferential treatment for their families in return for the successful fulfillment of their wartime duty.<sup>19</sup>

These petitions linked the individual author to both the war effort and the family whose condition compelled him to write. Troops challenged the incongruity between their reality at the

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<sup>17</sup> Stalin celebrated this role in his 1944 May Day speech: "Soviet women have rendered invaluable services in the cause of the defense of the Fatherland, courageously enduring all wartime hardships and inspiring exploits among Red Army warriors - the liberators of our Motherland" The novel use of "Fatherland" in relation to women's roles and "Motherland" in relation to implicitly-male soldiers appears in the original, as "Отечества" followed by "Родина." in J. V. Stalin, *O Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voine Sovetskogo Soiuza* [On the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union] (St. Petersburg: Piter, 2010), 117.

<sup>18</sup> Soldiers rarely made the distinction, but the date rested on which borders counted: those of 1938 or 1941.

<sup>19</sup> Officially, soldiers' families had special rights to return to their prewar housing, although this was far less than soldiers would demand, and in the case of occupied territories, irrelevant given the destruction of Soviet cities and towns. Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), p258-262.



front and the homogeneity of propaganda narratives.<sup>20</sup> Soldiers presented their requests within an extended biography, in which they situated themselves as citizens, combatants, and even heroes, in order to bolster their personal demands on the state. Embedded in these discussions of self, family, and frontline service, fighting men expressed a gendered subjectivity that drew from wartime and prewar official narratives as well as frontline adaptations of them.<sup>21</sup>

Many soldiers believed that liberation from German occupation should include an end to the hardship it caused, which they sought to achieve for their own families, especially if state care was inadequate or non-existent. Junior Lieutenant S. M. Naslednikov presented himself as a willing participant in the collective endeavor of liberation until his personal interests diverged from those of the official war effort:

I had no contact with my family for three years. They were in territory temporarily occupied by the Germans (BSSR Mogilev Oblast'), and I was at the front. 3.08.44 I received a letter from my family, from which I learned that remaining alive were my elderly mother and sister born in 1929 [who] in the past, specifically 1943 were deported by the Germans to the Minsk region. They returned to their home village 15.07.44, where they found hardship and devastation. For these reasons they are in a poor state - without food and means to exist. My brother born 1925 was captured by the German field gendarmerie [as a partisan] and his fate is unknown. My father was already dead [before the occupation].<sup>22</sup>

Naslednikov's petition situated his military service alongside his family's time under occupation to justify their need for care as a reason for discharge. Such a rhetorical strategy illustrates how soldiers could re-interpret official scripts as grounds to assert personal motives, rather than emulate the Soviet ideal of subordinating personal desires to those of the collective.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This was an enduring issue for Soviet citizens, but one which diarists in the 1930s had much less trouble resolving by focusing on collective achievements rather than local or personal setbacks as a measure of Soviet success. Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 360-361.

<sup>21</sup> Such tactics and reasons for requesting leave or discharge mirror soldiers' efforts in 1941, but the combat service and markers of merit changed their content considerably. See chapter 1.

<sup>22</sup> S.M. Naslednikov to Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, 30 September, 1944. GARF Fond 7523 Opis 29 Delo 230 List 84.

<sup>23</sup> Hellbeck, 349-350.

The biographical sketches soldiers provided in their leave and discharge petitions reinterpreted the official script of whole families of brothers, fathers, and sons serving in the Red Army simultaneously. To gain leave to help his wife and two surviving boys, Private I. M. Kazirov emphasized not only his own three years of service, but explained how “During the second [sic] patriotic war two of my sons have died in battle with the fascist German invaders, and one son born 1919 is missing in action.”<sup>24</sup> To enhance the significance of their own military service, and underscore their family’s plight in the rear, soldiers like Kazirov recounted the losses of their brothers and fathers in the war effort.

Corporal Ivan G. Abashkin presented his wounds and medals as further reasons, alongside his family’s difficulties, that he should be granted an early discharge:

like a soldier of the RKKA I have fulfilled and am fulfilling my sworn duty as expected. Mikhail Ivanovich, as a participant in the Patriotic War, I have been contused twice and wounded once since October 1942 in the course of fulfilling the orders of commanders in battle at the front with the German occupiers. I have received the decorations “Medal from combat service” and the badge “Excellent artilleryman.” I, as a warrior of the RKKA appeal to you with a request for aid that I need for my family life. My mother died [померла] in 1942 and my father and brother perished [погибли] in battle for the motherland. Two sisters, 13 and 10 years old remain [in my family], who had been evacuated [but have now] returned to our region near the front line, and at present they live in poverty and are not in our home and without the limited means they had earlier in the war. And so I have received a letter, in which they write from the first lines they cannot last any longer and ask me as their brother and only surviving relative to come and help them.<sup>25</sup>

Abashkin’s request highlights petitioning soldiers’ shared use of official measure of dedication and achievement: male relatives in combat, wounds, and medals. These merits all pertained exclusively to the front and combat, all functioned as evidence of ideal soldierly behavior according to official scripts, and all contrasted with female relatives’ role in the war effort and that of the feminized Soviet rear at large.

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<sup>24</sup> I. M. Kazirov to Supreme Soviet of the USSR, 16 November 1944. GARF Fond 7523 Opis 29 Delo 230 List 46.

<sup>25</sup> I.G. Abashkin to Supreme Soviet of the USSR 8 June 1944. GARF Fond 7523 Opis 29 Delo 189 List 13.

The petitions of Naslednikov, Kazirov, and Abashkin represent the typical elements of soldiers' biographical petitions: a dual commitment to frontline duty and family care, a family's liberation in their home region as the reason for him to leave the front, and distinguished military service as a basis to make personal claims of the state. When their families regained their freedom, but the war effort continued beyond Soviet borders, their personal motives as citizen-soldiers resurfaced.<sup>26</sup> Across nationality, age, rank, party status, and family type, petitions reveal soldiers' agency in adapting and combining official scripts to assert a self that remained aligned with the collective while asserting personal motives rooted in official objectives. Moreover, the assertion of an avowedly masculine soldierly subjectivity constituted the most enduring aspect of those official scripts within soldiers' adaptations.

Typical of such requests, these soldiers echoed official rhetoric in presenting men as the only contributors to the war effort in their families, and as the only alternative to state care for their wives and children. Red Army troops' alternative concept of reduced obligations for men with relatives who formed a family-at-the-front did nothing to alter the passive place of women in official scripts. Red Army fighters also asserted an alternate significance to medals and official scripts of heroism, which they rooted in a personal focus on the family care that liberation necessitated. Rather than measure their "usefulness to society" through official recognition of their contributions, soldiers used their military service to demand personal benefits, suggesting that such value to the collective, along with the liberation effort itself, was a hollow achievement unless their families' conditions improved accordingly.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Preventing this split had been a goal of military training since the 1920s. Joshua Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation*, (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), 137.

<sup>27</sup> For usefulness, see Hellbeck, 349-350; On the prewar connection between success and personal material rewards, see Lewis Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 213.

Many soldiers accepted the official script of combat wounds as evidence of their contribution to the war effort and a marker of patriotism that legitimized their status as soldiers.<sup>28</sup> However, they presented themselves as having endured this hardship not only as a sort of down payment on their contribution to victory, but as part of the larger pattern of contributions that entitled them to make claims and justify a renewed focus on concern for their families. While similar to other claims for family leave and discharge, soldiers who invoked their wounds in such cases presented contrasting meanings of bodily harm and suffering in line with official scripts about the gendered experience of liberation. Male soldiers' wounds marked a dedication to victory and source of pride in contrast to women's suffering because of the deprivations of occupation, which was neither heroic nor patriotic, but simply tragic. The former strengthened soldiers' status and sense of entitlement, and the latter reinforced ideas of feminine dependence and passivity.

As Michael Roper has asserted, studies of gendered subjectivities, rather than simply ideological constructs of gender, must consider why men make emotional investments in particular cultural representations of masculinity.<sup>29</sup> Abashkin and his fellow petition-writing Red Army troops revealed a sense of subjectivity through the range of correct or desirable behaviors they exhibited in battle, but broke from official scripts by asserting intense feelings of guilt for their families' hardships.<sup>30</sup> Rather than reject the official masculine ideal, soldiers' self-presentation deviated from it in order to address the failure of a sort of social contract

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<sup>28</sup> There does not appear to have been any clear policy regarding men receiving wounded leave before returning to the front, but it was rarely granted.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Roper, "Slipping Out of View: Subjectivity and Emotion in Gender History," *History Workshop Journal* 59 no.1 (2005): 59.

<sup>30</sup> Even among devoted Communist party members in peacetime, the subordination of family to party loyalty proved difficult. In contrast, soldiers uncritically adopted what prewar party officials considered a feminine and "bourgeois" attitude to family, and yet buffered their claims with official scripts and presented them in a resolutely masculine framework. Igal Halfin, "Intimacy in an Ideological Key: The Communist Case of the 1920s and 1930s" in *Language and Revolution: Making Modern Political Identities*, ed. Igal Halfin (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), 65.

underpinning soldierly masculinity: state care for the families of frontline troops. These soldiers could not subordinate their familial duty to the collective war effort because of this unfulfilled state promise, even if their petitions seemed to express a masculine subjectivity that blended the soldierly with aspects of 1930s scripts of paternal responsibility.<sup>31</sup> A constant issue for Soviet citizens even in peacetime, the difficulty of reconciling reality with “revolutionary truth” in the context of liberation (as with earlier stages of the war) compelled soldiers to improvise and adapt in response to the conflicting demands placed on them from front and rear.<sup>32</sup>

### **The fears and joys of conquest**

In addition to the petitions presented above, soldiers’ discontent with fighting after liberation and in foreign territory registered with Soviet leaders through a variety of channels. Frontline political workers faced complaints and communicated their difficulty repeating the same narrative to soldiers’ about the continuation of the war, explaining that “[our] seminars do not suffice... we lead them monthly and almost all are on the same themes and problems, only the wording changes.”<sup>33</sup> Throughout the summer and into fall, censors read soldiers’ letters home about how “we have been on foreign land for a while now. What a frightful bore! It seems as is if the sun and air are different than ours, to say nothing of how things look.”<sup>34</sup> Likewise, a Hero of the Soviet Union complained, “we do not get a word of the Polish language, but they say [in Russian] ‘you have come. Okay, but better if you hadn’t, you are not on our side.’”<sup>35</sup> Such experiences contrasted the optimistic editorials that proclaimed “in the name of the liberation of the long-suffering fraternal Polish people - forward to the West!”, which tried to drag the popular

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<sup>31</sup> Although it emerged in the context of divorce and abortion legislation debates in the 1930s, Soviet propaganda promoted a specifically masculine responsibility for family care. David Hoffman, “Mothers in the Motherland”, *Journal of Social History* 34 no.1 (2000): 44-45.

<sup>32</sup> For the problem of this gap in subjectivities of civilians in the 1930s, see Hellbeck, 360-361.

<sup>33</sup> Letter from Sr. Lt. K.G. Nedvin to Soviet President Kalinin. RGASPI Fond 78 Opis 1 Delo 1028 List 4.

<sup>34</sup> Letter Of M.M. Ivanov to his girlfriend, 18 October 1944. 1944 RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1205 List 2.

<sup>35</sup> Letter of V.E. Bugaev to his mother, 12 May 1944. RGASPI Fond M-7 Opis 2 Delo 218 List 6.

goal of liberation far past its logical conclusion.<sup>36</sup> Soldiers' expressions of discontent with fighting on foreign soil to liberate seemingly ungrateful foreign peoples proved minor in comparison to the undisciplined behavior of Soviet troops in Eastern Europe that summer.

It was in Romania that the Red Army waged its first battles against Axis forces outside the Soviet Union, and there that discipline suddenly collapsed. A July report to the Red Army's political administration (PUR), including its chairman, A.S. Shcherbakov, provided the macro-statistics as well as details of specific incidents of rape, drunkenness, desertion, torture, self-inflicted wounds, and looting. Beyond the assessment that such incidents had increased every month the Red Army had spent in Romania, the report concluded: "The content of agitation and propaganda very poorly reflected the special conditions of war in enemy territory."<sup>37</sup> The special conditions consisted of Soviet soldiers lacking the restraint they showed to civilians and their property within Soviet territory. The report also included recommendations to resolve the situation, which focused on improving and adapting political work among the forces in Romania, but lacked specific orders about how to explain the new frontline context. In October, new reports reached Shcherbakov and his first deputies in the PUR, detailing 3,763 disciplinary infractions in a single air army in one month, and again lacking in any specific changes in the content of political work.<sup>38</sup> Indiscipline continued and exhortations for soldiers to exhibit "culturedness" on foreign soil and among foreign women failed. In this context, Stalin issued an order that signaled the beginning of a new narrative in propaganda, based on his personal

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<sup>36</sup> "The liberation of Poland has begun," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 26 July 1944, 1.

<sup>37</sup> RGASPI Fond 17 Opis 125 Delo 241 Listy 88-91.

<sup>38</sup> RGASPI Fond 88 Opis 1 Delo 975 List 6-45.

leadership and the Red Army's final objective: the destruction of the enemy, capture of Berlin, and total victory.<sup>39</sup>

In November of 1944, a shift took place in frontline propaganda and political work. Stalin's Order 220, marking the anniversary of the Revolution, explained: "The past year has been the year of the complete liberation of Soviet territory of the German-fascist invaders ... Our remaining task is to crush Hitlerite Germany in short order with a rapid onslaught in concert with the armies of our allies."<sup>40</sup> Stalin's definitive announcement of a new objective reverberated through Red Army political-morale during the two months of military planning and preparation for the invasion of Germany. Stalin's implication that conquest held equal importance with liberation seemed to respond to the growing incidents of indiscipline and reports of discontent amongst Red Army troops already fighting outside Soviet borders.<sup>41</sup>

*Krasnaia Zvezda* articles and editorials paid considerable attention to Stalin's Order 220 in the days and weeks that followed, using it to address the central question of why soldiers must continue fighting. Stalin's personal role grew immensely in these efforts to motivate soldiers, evident in a 10 November *Krasnaia Zvezda* editorial that described him as the "father of all our historic victories," credited him with "inspiring the spirit of all soldiers for the final destruction of the German-fascist invaders," and exhorting soldiers to "fight as Stalin has taught and demanded [you to fight]."<sup>42</sup> To reinforce this message, Shcherbakov stressed to senior military political workers: "our Red Army, under the leadership of our leader - the Supreme Commander,

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<sup>39</sup> M.I. Kalinin talks with new Red Army political workers, 15 May 1944. RGASPI Fond 78 Opis 1 Delo 1009 List 4.

<sup>40</sup> J.V. Stalin, "Order of the Supreme Commander No. 220" in J. V. Stalin, *O Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voine Sovetskogo Soiuza* [On the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union] (St. Petersburg: Piter, 2010), 133-135.

<sup>41</sup> The Soviet general staff prepared a plan in October and November, and after two months of such preparation, the Red Army began the "Vistula-Oder operation" on January 12, 1945. Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, 364-366.

<sup>42</sup> "Decisive Victories of the Red Army," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 10 November 1944, 1.

Marshall of the Soviet Union, comrade Stalin - completed a historic feat.”<sup>43</sup> Another editorial described the army as “led by Stalinist commanding genius,” while the fact that with “Stalin’s leadership, [the Red Army] surpassed the army of the enemy in strength, experience, and the art of war” provided further reason for praise.<sup>44</sup> The attribution of all Red Army victories to his leadership served to justify his order for a final battle for Germany as an unquestionable decision.

This renewed focus on Stalin in late 1944, which echoed propaganda depictions of him as a father to the country in the 1930s, extended beyond praise for his strategic leadership and linked him personally to individual Red Army fighters, their exploits, and the heroism that would bring victory. Frontline newspapers reported on soldiers’ positive reactions to Order 220. In *Krasnoarmeiskaia Pravda*, Sergeant Kornienko relayed his determination to do his duty: “Listening to the order of comrade Stalin, I thoughtfully responded to it: ‘We are fulfilling your words, comrade Stalin. We are striking at the fascist beast in his lair!’” In *Krasnoe Znamia*, private Ovcharenko expressed his inspiration: “I am confident that my contribution will lead to the decisive blow against Hitlerite Germany and I foresee the banner of victory raised above Berlin.”<sup>45</sup> In each case, the soldiers quoted a part of the order, and embraced their new objective without hesitation. Such articles did not single out soldiers who performed exploits, but those who expressed praise and loyalty to Stalin as he led them to Berlin.

While such praise for Stalin had appeared earlier in the war, a new type of article provided lengthy reports of regular soldiers’ reactions, all of which emphasized Stalin’s renewed role as the primary source of motivation to continue fighting. Testimonials about how “I am

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<sup>43</sup> 11 November 1944. RGASPI Fond 88 Opis 1 Delo 977 List 1.

<sup>44</sup> “The pride of victors,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 26 November 1944, 1; “Crush the fascist reptile!” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 23 January 1944, 1.

<sup>45</sup> Both soldiers’ quotations are excerpts from their respective newspapers, published in “The propaganda of comrade Stalin’s report in Red Army newspapers,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 20 December 1944, 3.



immensely happy and joyful that I heard Comrade Stalin's speech... It has added to my strength" and "Comrade Stalin is speaking about us... now [our] objectives are clear," demonstrated the inspiration and clarity of purpose that only Stalin could provide.<sup>46</sup> The happiness and joy that Stalin inspired in such fighters implicitly freed them from any fear, whether of death in battle or of dying after certain victory appeared on the horizon but sacrifice and loss blocked the path to it. Such articles emphasized the new iteration of late war frontline heroes: rather than the exploits they performed, the correct sustaining motivation distinguished the best fighters from the rest, and Stalin's leadership alone provided that motivation. These "Total Warriors" exhibited a fearless desire to keep fighting on Stalin's orders, and this loyalty proved their greatest virtue, rather than any specific exploits or combat prowess.

Beyond his role providing inspiration and motivation, Stalin acted as symbolic teacher for frontline soldiers. Sniper N.S. Afanas'ev killed 179 Germans to earn the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, but his front-page profile in *Krasnaia Zvezda* focused on his new role as a unit commander, rather than his exploits in battle. As a commander, Afanas'ev explained to his men that in "preparing for the decisive battle with the German-fascist invaders," they would have to "learn the degree of military mastery demanded by Supreme Commander comrade Stalin" to replicate Afanas'ev's success.<sup>47</sup> Rather than justifiably claiming he could impart skills to his men, Afanas'ev cited Stalin's teaching of military mastery as the most important lesson the snipers could learn. While the profile mentioned his exploits, the article tellingly concluded with an emphasis on Afanas'ev's loyalty to Stalin and the assertion of mastery as a core trait of future heroes. Even with a Hero of the Soviet Union, the increased use of testimonials endorsing

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<sup>46</sup> "Soldiers vow to fulfill the leader's order," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 11 November 1944, 3; "We will hoist the banner of victory over Berlin," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 11 November 1944, 3.

<sup>47</sup> "Hero of the Soviet Union Afanas'ev in his unit," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 12 December 1944, 1.

Stalin's orders or "the Stalinist school of military art," rather than reports of battle heroics, distinguished the "Total Warrior" ideal from counterparts earlier in the war.<sup>48</sup>

Alongside such individual examples, Stalin received credit for creating such heroes from ordinary Soviet men from the start of the war. In "Three Years of Vseovobuch," *Krasnaia Zvezda* explained that it was "On the initiative of Comrade Stalin that the State Defense Committee on 17 September 1941 ordered the creation of the universal compulsory military training of citizens of the Soviet Union." While training was compulsory for both men and women, the article only listed men when boasting that "Many [trainees] in battle for the motherland covered themselves in undying glory. Famous are the names of Heroes of the Soviet Union..."<sup>49</sup> The liberated Ukraine likewise thanked Stalin for "defending the honor, independence and freedom" of Ukraine and producing "heroes of the Patriotic war from the best of the best sons of Soviet Ukraine..." along with "the sons of the other peoples of our multinational country," for which "from all their heart they say to their leader and teacher: thank you!"<sup>50</sup> In both cases, propaganda represented these mass mobilizations as the successful harnessing of Soviet manhood for the war effort and omitted women's roles as combatants, so that heroes appeared as symbolic "sons" to their "father" and "teacher," Stalin.<sup>51</sup>

The masculine character of the "Total Warrior" appears clearer still when compared to the rare depictions of women in Red Army service in late 1944. The article "Young women - military cooks" presented the contrasting case of typically feminine work that remained unconnected to Stalin's inspiration and teaching: "Young women learned not only culinary arts,

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<sup>48</sup> The term is used in explaining recent Red Army successes "The decisive victories of the Red Army," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 10 November 1944, 1.

<sup>49</sup> "Three Years of Vseovobuch," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 17 September 1944, 2.

<sup>50</sup> "Words to the Great Stalin," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 14 December 1944, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Stalin appeared in an analogous fatherly role for the hero pilots of the 1930s in their efforts to break long-distance flying records. Clark, 126-128.

but also military affairs. Theoretical work in classes on the organization of nutrition in the Red Army and practical work in kitchens contributed to the training of qualified military cooks.”<sup>52</sup> Both the routine training and non-combat role of these women provided a sharp contrast between the transplanting of a typically domestic feminine task into the military realm and the celebrated exploits male heroes achieved under Stalin’s guidance.

While combat certainly appeared as the exclusive undertaking of the “Total Warrior,” what fully distinguished this heroic ideal as masculine was Stalin’s connection to him in a symbolic father-son relationship. Soldier-specific propaganda failed to present any link between Stalin and individual military women, and even the Central Committee’s International Women’s Day resolution lacked any mention of Stalin’s relationship with women’s contributions to the war effort. The “Total Warrior” was also an ideal Stalinist subject, expressing his loyalty by subordinating any hint of personal motive to the collective goal expressed in Stalin’s order for the capture of Berlin. In this way, the new ideal represented a re-assertion of the external hegemonic masculinity in response to the internal masculine challenge of soldiers’ liberation-based assertions of their duty of family care in their petitions. Rather than incorporate elements of that alternative masculinity, the “Total Warrior” reaffirmed the connection between Stalin’s leadership, state power, and masculine hero ideals as the basis for victory.

Rather than the confidence that Stalin’s guidance inspired, Red Army fighters’ letters and recollections of battle beyond the Soviet frontier reveal a heightened focus on fear, which permeated both sides of the frontline. The rise in troops’ references to manageable levels of fear in letters and memoirs constituted part of a specific late war reaction to combat, given that Red Army doctors documented an increase in the number of cases of neuropsychological breakdown

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<sup>52</sup> “Young women - military cooks,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 5 December 1944, 2.

or shell-shock.<sup>53</sup> As an emotion, fear should be understood as socially and contextually defined, as connected to specific behaviors and actions, and as part of individual subjectivities.<sup>54</sup> In the military realm, fear constitutes an emotional response to combat conditions that is responsible for, but distinct from, acts of cowardice.<sup>55</sup> This section examines troops' expressions and memories of fear as a state of mind to be dealt with in and around battle, what they believed caused such feelings, how soldiers should respond to it, and the fear the retreating enemy experienced as evidenced by his actions in combat. Red Army men distinguished between different sources of fear and expressions of it as legitimate or not based on the larger set of standards collectively established in their units. While frontline rhetoric mentioned fear only in describing German soldiers in defeat, Soviet fighters saw no shame in comrades' fears of permanent separation from their families on the liberated home front. Combat troops thus judged fearful feelings and actions according to the group-defined norms of a soldierly masculinity, in which certain fears after liberation were specifically masculine, while others irrevocably diminished the status of men who expressed them in battle.

The understandings of fear and cowardice that soldiers developed within their units shaped their judgment of enemy fighters in the late war, a time when the latter received renewed attention amidst the Red Army's advance into foreign territory. Soviet troops appear to have focused more on the enemy after liberation because they were fighting on *his* soil, whether in Germany itself, the territory of German allies such as Romania and Hungary, or German-occupied non-Soviet lands such as Poland. Soldiers ascribed fear to explain the behavior of

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<sup>53</sup> Such cases increased by one third from 1943 to 1944-45. Paul Wanke, *Russian/Soviet Military Psychology, 1904-1945* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 87.

<sup>54</sup> Mark Steinberg and Valeria Sobol, "Introduction" in *Interpreting Emotions in Russia and Eastern Europe*, ed. Mark Steinberg et al. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011), 6-9.

<sup>55</sup> As a veteran British officer and military theorist explained: "By cowardice, I do not mean fear. Cowardice is a label we reserve for something a man does. What passes through his mind is his own affair" Lord Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage* (London: Constable, 1966), 9.

enemy combatants who behaved in a cowardly manner, especially by surrendering, running from the field of battle and abandoning their weapons or equipment. As an artilleryman explained, “...already at some point in 1944, the relationship [between us and the enemy] changed. I remember how we took many Germans prisoner.”<sup>56</sup> Another soldier made this link in a way that was typically flippant for discussions of the enemy, describing how the “Romanians run to the Seret [river]” because “they had been scared shitless.”<sup>57</sup> Such frontline writings focused on the character of individual enemy soldiers and their emotional state. A tanker writing home elaborated on conclusions that could be drawn from battle performance: “So that you understand their current feeling and mood... the Fritzes run, we beat them and soon comes the day of final victory. Now already their bravery is not what it was earlier, in all, they have fallen to such a state, that they will soon be finished.”<sup>58</sup> Victorious Red Army fighters thus cited enemy soldiers’ fearfulness to explain the defeat and retreat of enemy armies. This assessment suggested that the moral quality of opposing soldiers explained the outcome of the war, rather than the structural changes in the course of the war that had taken place since June 1941, such as German defeat in North Africa and US entry into the war.

When observing individual enemy fighters, Soviet troops believed they could read emotions on their enemies’ faces. An artilleryman described a close encounter with the enemy: “The Nazi froze for a second, waiting to be struck with it or shot... Flushed, deformed by fear and hate, his narrow eyes were looking up at me.”<sup>59</sup> Red Army fighters thus chose to present the enemy as a collection of individual soldiers too afraid to fight effectively, rather than units lacking the logistical and numerical means to sustain a strategic defensive posture. This

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<sup>56</sup> Recollections of M.F. Borisov in *Ia dralsia s pantservaffe* [I fought against the Panzer forces] ed. Artem Drabkin (Moscow: Iauza, 2007), 123.

<sup>57</sup> Gabriel Temkin, *My Just War* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1998), 174.

<sup>58</sup> Letter of L. N. Byzov to his family, 30 June 1944. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 125 List 130.

<sup>59</sup> Petr Mikhin, *Guns Against the Reich* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2010), 107.

approach to describing combat emotions and actions, and the judgment of enemy soldiers that accompanied them, corresponds to what Jan Plamper describes as the new language of modern war in the era of modernity, in which “the possibility of destruction of self – for example, by death in a war – then produces much greater anxiety than if the potential for death remained in the realm of transcendent forces that control man and his world.”<sup>60</sup> With these judgments in mind, Soviet soldiers cursed the enemy not only for the laundry list of established grievances, but because he violated the norms of soldierly masculinity that governed membership in combat collectives. German fearfulness thus reinforced the superiority of normative Red Army soldiers for possessing personal qualities to endure the fear-inducing experiences of combat.

Soviet soldiers presented a distinct emotional response to late-war combat because of their feelings of joy in battle as well as a lack of fear. Some Red Army men discussed their feelings only briefly, possibly to minimize questions about which potentially frightful events surrounded them, as a rookie machine gunner explained to his mother and sister: “When my [first] day at the front came, I felt no fear.”<sup>61</sup> Others utilized civilian sweethearts and wives as inspiration, including an Azeri infantryman: “When I know you’re thinking of me, I am not scared while advancing under the machine gun fire of the enemy.”<sup>62</sup> Showing a lack of fear was both a source of pride and acted as a sort of “‘psychological assault’” in the words of one infantryman, which was so powerful in battle that “the enemy could not stand this and fled.”<sup>63</sup> A sense of joy replaced feelings of fear among many soldiers, who relished the opportunity to act heroically and punish the enemy:

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<sup>60</sup> Jan Plamper, “Fear: Soldiers and Emotion in Early Twentieth-Century Russian Military Psychology” *Slavic Review* 68, no. 2 (2009): 262.

<sup>61</sup> Letter of Vladimir M. Divov to his family, 29 December 1944. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 698 List 2.

<sup>62</sup> Letter of Isfandiiaf M. Guseinov to his girlfriend, 21 November 1944. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1411/20 List 3.

<sup>63</sup> Evgeni Bessonov, *Tank Rider* (London: Greenhill Books, 2003), 50.

The Germans approached the river, and we came under heavy fire. We fired at them as well, man to man. It was a fierce fight... Instead of fear, I felt a kind of joy that I was firing directly at approaching German soldiers. I saw them coming and I took aim at them. ...That change from fear to calm confidence confirmed for me the many stories of heroic behavior by ordinary soldiers.<sup>64</sup>

Fear and joy thus appeared as opposite emotional responses to combat. The absence of fear marked the Red Army's superior battlefield performance over the enemy on the tactical level, and even constituted an emotional component to heroism.

Post-combat conversations occasionally turned to recent battles, and in these informal discussions soldiers assessed and synthesized fighting experience into collective norms at the front. Soldiers sometimes joked that a comrade was frightened in battle after his fearlessness led to victory, thus singling out his behavior as a model for the group: "In order to relax we all took a shot of vodka. They started to joke about me: 'Bessonov, why did you run along the front, not forward, during the attack? ...Lads, he was so scared that he forgot the direction of the attack!' ...Those big lads thought it was funny, they laughed like horses."<sup>65</sup> Fear and joy operated as part of an emotional competition with the enemy and among Red Army men, in which feeling and especially showing fear diminished men on both sides of the front. Critical comparisons of how "our men were less sensitive and more stoic. We were better adapted to... physical and psychological stress [than the Germans]" not only asserted the superiority of Red Army men, but also invoked ideas of feminine softness as antithetical to military success.<sup>66</sup> Contrasting their fearlessness and joy in battle with their enemy's displays of cowardice, Red Army soldiers appeared to express the "romantic" view of combat fear that Jan Plamper has identified with Stalinist military policy, which "saw fear as an aberration from the norm of brave, fearless

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<sup>64</sup> Adam Bronner, *My War against the Nazis*, (Tuscaloosa: Fire Ant Books, 2008), 100-101.

<sup>65</sup> In fact, he had run along the front in order to rouse his men and show them that the enemy machine guns were not as dangerous as they thought; his example helped them overcome *their* fear. Bessonov, 115- 116.

<sup>66</sup> Mikhin, 87. For a discussion of late Tsarist and early Soviet ideas of masculine and feminine roles and virtues regarding citizenship and military service as consonant with European ones, see Sanborn, 162-164.

soldiers.”<sup>67</sup> Some men, and many officers and political officials, undoubtedly felt this way, particularly as they rose in rank and had less and less firsthand experience of battle.

However, Red Army fighters did not exclusively adhere to this perspective, or retain their optimistic focus on German forces’ weakness, in the post-liberation phase of the war. Battle-hardened troops openly expressed different feelings of fear in response to fighting after liberation and outside Soviet borders, when their deaths no longer seemed to hold any relevance for the fate of loved ones and the condition of the home front. This change in perspective emerged despite the end of a threat to soldiers from within: confidence in soldiers’ performance and the closeness of victory led Stalin, on 29 October 1944, to abolish the blocking units established to shoot Red Army men retreating without orders.<sup>68</sup> To be sure, cowardice remained shameful and grounds for official punishment and social ostracism among comrades. Yet it was a less immediate but more inescapable sense of vulnerability that plagued many soldiers, stemming from a split in their conceptions of self between the battlefield reality surrounding them and the civilian world they had left and imagined was once again free from war.

Soviet troops’ concerns centered on their diminished chances for survival as the revised strategic goal of unconditional German surrender seemed to prolong the war. This resulted in a mix of optimism about a given operation amidst fears for the enduring possibility of death and its impact on family at home, as an artillery scout noted in his frontline journal: “But I, in the heat of battle, in anticipation of an offensive breakthrough, and in preparation to live, and of course, to defeat the evil enemy, I thought about family – children, wife, mother, imagined them, how they could right at this moment become orphans.”<sup>69</sup> Such ambivalence about battle and victory reflect historian Leonard Smith’s assertion that “a grey area existed between command

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<sup>67</sup> Plamper, 272-282.

<sup>68</sup> Alexander Statiev, “Blocking Units in the Red Army,” *The Journal of Military History* 75 no.2 (2012): 494.

<sup>69</sup> Wartime journal entry of B. V. Pavlov, 22 May 1944. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 903 Listy 5-6.



expectations and what soldiers in the trenches determined was possible” which did not necessarily lead to mutiny or even overt discontent while still revealing limits to the influence of military institutions over soldiers’ views.<sup>70</sup> A political worker writing from Germany expressed this sense of frustrated frontline vulnerability in reply to his wife’s impatient questions: “When will the war end? This question weighs down on us. We understand perfectly well, that you are no less fed up with the war than we are, but [think of] our situation, [where] men stare death in the eye.”<sup>71</sup> Even among soldiers who met the expectations of their comrades and joyously fought the enemy, a new fear emerged, a fear of meaningless death, which subtly questioned an official strategy that diverged from the liberation goal in which soldiers felt a personal stake.<sup>72</sup>

The same letters reveal a sense among soldiers that this new fear was not only legitimate, but a specifically male burden borne by fighters while women at home enjoyed the return of peace. Such a distinction emerges from the soldiers’ juxtaposition of front and rear events, as they saw them, such as a Komsomol mobilized into the infantry:

As you know, I survived typhus and a concussion. I have just tried to leave the hospital without orders, in order to catch up with my unit. However, I was not successful, and they ordered me to another unit, and we are already on the second day of our offensive. Yesterday we threw the enemy back 30-35 kilometers, all [fighting to] drive the occupier to his own lair. In a few days we will be on his territory ... and always with us have been dear examples of wives, fiancées, and mothers [who have been] faithfully waiting for the return home of your loved ones.<sup>73</sup>

Like these contrasting burdens of late war, another infantryman juxtaposed the news of front and home: “Well Boris, I can report the latest news from the front to you. It is that in the Budapest

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<sup>70</sup> Leonard Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division During World War I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 14.

<sup>71</sup> Letter of F. A. Liuchmin to his family, 20 April 1945. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 521 List 5.

<sup>72</sup> Wartime opinion in a modern army, and more importantly the feeling that people at home value their efforts, can play a critical role in determining soldiers’ morale, as John Lynn explains, so that a change in stated Soviet aims could doubly affect Red Army men: first by devaluing their acceptance of what the state originally asked of them, and then by challenging how they justified those sacrifices to their family. John Lynn, *Bayonets of the Republic* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 27-28.

<sup>73</sup> He and an unspecified number of brothers were at the front. Letter of Bato-Zhargal Gombadarievich Dymbrepov to his family, 31 October 1944. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 704 Listy 4-5.

region Pavel Stepanov and Ivan Iakovich were killed. ...what news is there in Moscow, how are people living [their] lives in peace?”<sup>74</sup> A junior officer from Leningrad (who had adopted a family he stayed with on leave), highlighted similarly gendered differences: “I congratulate you, Tatiana Vasil’evna, for your order of ‘Maternal Glory’ for giving birth to seven children. ...The end [of the war] will be difficult and many men will not make it, and like all of them I want to live, but not all will survive it and there will be great joy only for those who remain alive!”<sup>75</sup> Such an active discussion of differences between front and rear and especially women’s activities grew as a preoccupation in letters sent from foreign soil.

The timing of such concerns varied among men and units, but soldiers consistently remembered the movement into foreign territory on their sector of the front as the trigger for these new feelings. The first main consequence of leaving Soviet soil was soldiers’ greater sense of separation from home, as one artilleryman recalled that during fighting outside Budapest. He and his men “wanted to talk to civilians, even if they were foreigners. We would spend hours staring out the open doors of our cattle car, hoping to catch sight of a woman or child, because we had missed them so much after six months.”<sup>76</sup> The second was a heightened fear of death, and a sense it would be pointless. An infantryman, also fighting outside Budapest in late 1944 explained: “You knew that the war was quite possibly coming to an end tomorrow and at the same time you knew that you could be killed shortly before. By my personal experience – I was

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<sup>74</sup> Letter of D. N. Aksimenko to his medically discharged comrade Boris P. Kustov, 10 February 1945. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1161 Listy 12-13.

<sup>75</sup> The archive file notes explain that his family died during the Leningrad blockade, but does not specify the location of his adopted family. Their relationship seems exceptional only because they had already met during the war, rather than after, as was often the case with families adopting (or being adopted by) comrades of dead sons or husbands purely through correspondence. Ivanov signed his letters “your son,” although he referred to his adopted mother using the formal address of name and patronymic, not a variation of mother, which was virtually nonexistent in writing between biological sons and mothers during the war. Letter of Mikhail M. Ivanov to his adopted family, 22 August 1944. RGASPI Fond M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1205 Listy 1-2.

<sup>76</sup> Mikhin, 193.

afraid. I asked my fate to let my life last longer.”<sup>77</sup> The combination of fear and separation gave rise to a realization among troops that their role in the war effort, including death, had become separate from that of the national collective remaining at home, making death more frightening just when the enemy ceased to be.<sup>78</sup>

The details that preoccupied soldiers’ mentions of home suggest a widespread perception of life in Soviet territory after liberation as an increasingly female space, one detached from frontline realities. Such letter-writers imagined a liberated home front that complemented their sense of a masculine vulnerability rooted in fears of unnecessary risk and isolated sacrifice that those already enjoying peace would neither understand nor appreciate. Despite the continued hardships that prevailed in most of the Soviet Union, soldiers focused on those elements that highlighted their own vulnerability and endurance of such circumstances. Soldier, including components of a civilian life that emphasized normal femininity such as women giving birth, leading lives of peace, and facing no greater stress than waiting for their men to return. With such deliberate contrast, Red Army men depicted themselves as enduring the burden of war alone, and possessing the qualities required to fight on in spite of their isolation.

Despite their difference, both official rhetoric and soldiers’ culture reacted to frontline fears of continuing the war after liberation. The “Total Warrior” that appeared in frontline propaganda in late 1944 marked the sustained return of Stalin’s leadership role. Fighters’ bonds to their comrades strengthened after they lost hope of petitioned return before victory, and their affiliation with the national collective, whether through state or family, diminished. Ultimately, fear in late war Red Army propaganda content and among its rank and file focused on control or

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<sup>77</sup> Recollections of Georgii Ivanovich Minin in *Red Army Infantrymen Remember the Great Patriotic War*, ed. Artem Drabkin (Bloomington: Authorhouse, 2009), 143.

<sup>78</sup> Lynn identifies three collectives in wartime, but the critical distinction lies between the national collective and both the micro-level combat group and macro-level military collectives alike. Lynn, 23-25.

mastery, rather than elimination, reflecting a change from the zero tolerance policy exhibited by Stalin's "Not a step back" order at the height of crisis in 1942.<sup>79</sup>

### **The essential wartime roles of mother and lover**

While the success of the Red Army's liberation efforts prompted changes in official rhetoric about war aims, heroism, and leadership throughout the final year of the war, the most pronounced shift came in the depiction of Soviet women. Among soldiers, women at the front became a greater preoccupation than they had been earlier in the war, but troops remained fixated on an understanding of themselves as members of a masculine fighting collective. The thousands of women who had distinguished themselves in military service were no more visible at the end of the war than at the beginning, but another category of women gained acclaim with liberation. Front propaganda after October 1944 focused on the fertility of the Mother Heroine, combining the specific wartime emphasis on heroism with prewar pro-natalist goals and ideas about motherhood as a civic duty. For Red Army troops, sex, rather than motherhood, justified denying frontline women the status of comrades-in-arms. However, sexual potential was one of several reasons male soldiers judged women to be lacking the collective experiences of combat and front life, which prevented the formation of gender-inclusive primary group bonds. The sudden fascination of both soldierly and official attention on different incarnations of wartime femininity shared a common goal: to re-assert women's subordinate status.

To properly understand the significance of the new emphasis on women's fertility and sexuality in official rhetoric and male combatants, it is worth briefly considering the military and domestic policy context in which they emerged. Militarily, the Red Army moved out of the

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<sup>79</sup> As Jan Plamper notes, the assumptions underlying Stalin's order situated him in the "romantic" camp regarding fear, which asserted that real men did not feel it, making all who did cowards and unworthy of soldier or veteran status. This contrasts with the "realistic" perspective that accepted feelings of fear as inevitable, and sought to prepare men to cope, which had emerged in western military thinking after the First World War. Plamper, 282.

Baltic States and into East Prussia, in addition to capturing Debrecen, which opened the path to Budapest by the end of October, 1944. Further south, the start of the siege of Belgrade began in late October, marking the high point of uninterrupted Soviet success before progress temporarily stalled in the winter. It was in this context that the number of women serving in the Red Army reached its highest point, both in terms of sheer presence, with recruits peaking in June, and sacrifice, with casualty rates rising until July.<sup>80</sup> The policy context of the October shift consisted of the divorce reform of July 1944, followed by education the reform of April 1945. The former change limited support to unmarried mothers and further restricted divorce in anticipation of a decreased birthrate, while the latter aimed to create distinct masculine and feminine elements in the curriculum, in order to deal with the supposedly natural differences between young men and women, which included their interest and capabilities in national defense.<sup>81</sup> Amidst these developments, the final dozen women of the war to be decorated Heroes of the Soviet Union received no mention in *Krasnaia Zvezda*, while the first fourteen Mother Heroines received front page attention in November and December. As part of a pattern surrounding women's wartime and planned postwar roles in Soviet military service, the Mother Heroine emerged as a key legacy of wartime change in Soviet ideas about war and gender.

The simple title of the lead editorial in *Krasnaia Zvezda* on 28 October, 1944, "Mother Heroines," introduced a new ideal figure to Red Army soldiers. The editorial explained that this explicitly civilian heroism emerged from the wartime context, demanding recognition for "the role played by Soviet women... in the titanic battle for the honor, independence, and prosperity of the Motherland." Despite its radical difference from the types of heroes normally profiled in

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<sup>80</sup> Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 299-301.

<sup>81</sup> On divorce, see Liubov Denisova, *Rural Women in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 93-95. On education, see E. Thomas Ewing, *Separate Schools* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 7-12.

propaganda and awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union medal, the editorial borrowed from the established language of combat heroism, thus linking the two as ideal behaviors in the rear and at the front, respectively. The editorial thus explained the contribution of such women: "...in the days of fierce battle for the complete destruction of the enemy, the Soviet state has elevated to the highest national glory and honor the multi-child mothers' exploit" with which "every one of them has completed a great service to the Motherland."<sup>82</sup> While such a quantity-defined exploit bore a slight resemblance to oft-celebrated sniper kill counts, the editorial borrowed more directly from the frontline coverage of combat heroism and the Hero of the Soviet Union medal to introduce the new award. *Krasnaia Zvezda* published a list of the inaugural group of 14 Mother Heroines next to the editorial, just as it had for military heroes, listing occupation and region in place of rank and branch of service.

The editorial also used the language omitted for lesser exploits and reserved only for Heroes of the Soviet Union. This language emphasized how the women had been "awarded the honorable title of 'Mother Heroine,'" evoking a permanent change in status, rather than the "marking" or "decorating" of lesser badges which brought associations of school grades or one-time remuneration.<sup>83</sup> This parallel language did not signify actual equality, however, but instead marked a shift to an explicit gendering of heroism as a masculine-feminine binary. Earlier in the war, frontline propaganda allowed some space for women's contributions to the front, although rarely in combat, while portraying them primarily as victims in contrast to enemy-killing male soldiers. The Mother Heroine ideal removed this space, and instead produced an "emphasized femininity" to complement the masculine ideal, in which a hierarchical relationship existed

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<sup>82</sup> "Mother Heroines," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 28 October 1944, 1.

<sup>83</sup> The exclusive use of the term "присвоен" contrasts with the more common use of "отмечен" and especially "награжден" for everyday heroics, for example in "The Exploit of Aleksandr Matrosov's Brother," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 23 May 1944, 2 or "Aleksandr Kosmodemianskii gets revenge for the death of his heroine-sister," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 26 November 1944, 2, respectively.

between a feminine domestic heroism, restricted to non-combatant and home front activity and men's heroism in combat.<sup>84</sup>

The women featured in the editorial's individual profiles, and the details surrounding their exploits illustrate the unequal relationship between the heroism of prodigious mothers and that of men at the front. The first exemplary Soviet woman profiled, Anna S. Aleksakhinaia, earned Mother Heroine status not only because she "gave the fatherland 12 citizens," but also because "she gave the Red Army 8 manly warriors."<sup>85</sup> To further highlight the significance of heroic motherhood as producing not simply children, but sons and soldiers, the woman to receive second billing, Kseniia I. Zotova, actually produced more children, 13, but only 5 soldiers. Every other Mother Heroine given specific mention also had both her total children and combatant sons noted. One mother, Maria M. Ryzhkova, provides an exception, because from her 10 children, "Six of her sons and one daughter are in the ranks of the army." This single case of a non-mother woman in the article demanded a shift in language from combat to participation at the front, and simultaneously provided an example of another wartime role for women, but one not deserving of such praise or hero status. The sum of these Mother Heroines' contributions played a role in the war effort that was not only physiologically female but also ideally feminine. The quantitative output of motherhood merited hero status without front service, because ideal Soviet women produced their defenders. The lone woman to serve at the front alongside her brothers appears as implicitly less valuable to the war effort, despite her proximity to the fighting, because gender, rather than age, should have ideally determined her opportunities for wartime heroism.

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<sup>84</sup> The medals are similar in design, both consisting of a five pointed gold star, with a red-enameled scroll reading "Mother Heroine" and silver rays behind the star as the distinguishing embellishments of the newer variant.

<sup>85</sup> "Она дала Отчизне 12 граждан. Она дала Красной Армии 8 мужественных воинов." "Mother Heroines," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 28 October 1944, 1.

The editorial elaborated how women's maternal traits, along with female their capacity, defined women's contribution to the war effort, irrespective of age, class, or nationality. All Soviet women were to aspire to the Mother Heroine ideal, since "among the first Mother Heroines there are both peasants and representatives of our working class, there are daughters of the many peoples of the Soviet Union..." and "every Soviet women can raise citizen-patriots for the Fatherland." As if to remove any ambiguity about a potential generational basis for the strict division of front and home front roles illustrated above, further individual examples included notes such as "Evdokiia P. Soldatovaia's two sons and husband are fighting at the front" and how Valima G. Asadullina "raised and educated 10 children. Her husband died in battle at the front of the Patriotic war..." The editorial thus provided a direct contrast between mother heroines in the rear and their husbands, who fought and died alongside their sons. To punctuate the wartime importance of this civilian role, the editorial concluded by explaining that Mother Heroines both raised and inspired their sons to fight: "...having Mother Heroines bless their sons in battle with the enemy, the Motherland tells our fighters: in the name of our mothers, in the name of all of our peoples, strike at the enemy even stronger, move forward even faster to total victory!" This inspirational role linked maternal care and soldierly ferocity and subordinated the feminine heroism of the rear to the masculine counterpart fostered at the front that revered mothers.<sup>86</sup>

Frontline propaganda also presented the Mother Heroine as dependent on the Soviet state. Amidst the praise extended to these new heroes, the editorial thoroughly marginalized the contributions of other Soviet women in both front and rear in order to emphasize the credit due to the state for the "greatness, wisdom, and warmth" involved in creating and carrying out the new policy, through which "The Soviet state is widely and generously helping the families of its

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<sup>86</sup> "Mother Heroines," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 28 October 1944, 1.



defenders, and fully rewarding the dedicated efforts of mothers.” The implied value of the new policy to boost soldiers’ morale appeared elsewhere as a core consideration: “Red Army soldiers, like all Soviet people, with a deep sense of satisfaction understand the new Decree... This order clearly demonstrates that the socialist state, and the Bolshevik party by creating conditions for a happy mother... support our army, and help them in their struggle for victory.” Beyond motivating soldiers, the new policy used gender to express the preeminent role of the Soviet state in the war effort and justify its power: “Every one of our families, every Soviet mother raises for the Fatherland citizen-patriots, true builders and warriors of the great socialist state”<sup>87</sup> Through care for women in place of absent husbands, Soviet state power appeared as specifically masculine, and validated its management of the war effort through its care for the feminine Motherland along with Mother Heroines. The Mother Heroine ideal thus reinforced the dominance of masculine values in the exercise of state power and justified the state’s management of the war effort.<sup>88</sup>

The Mother Heroine ideal introduced in late October persisted as the framework for portraying Soviet women in frontline propaganda for the remainder of the war. In mid-November, “Mother of a hero” reiterated the theme of maternal inspiration when it explained how “the letters of Russian mothers” contained “tender words, simple advice... and an absolute order: strike the enemy, take revenge on him, without care for your own life.”<sup>89</sup> December saw the publication of two awards lists without comment, as was the standard for military orders: one for 107 prodigious mothers still under the 10 child threshold, and a second announcing a further

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<sup>87</sup> “Mother Heroines,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 28 October 1944, 1.

<sup>88</sup> For the validation of Soviet policies through women’s status in 1930s propaganda, see Choi Chaterjee, *Celebrating Women* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 135-158.

<sup>89</sup> “Mother of a hero,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 17 November 1944, 3.

31 recipients of the title “Mother Heroine.”<sup>90</sup> Other women performed roles more directly linked to the Red Army, but these remained apart from combat and firmly in the sphere of motherly tasks: “The 75 year old Russian woman actively aids the front. For three years of war she has knitted nearly two thousand pairs of wool socks and sent them to the front as a gift to the fighters of the Red Army.”<sup>91</sup> Her exploit aided the front while remaining feminine and non-combatant, and included the passive contribution of producing five sons to fight for her at the front. These examples illustrate how the creation of the Mother Heroine title transformed coverage of Soviet women in frontline propaganda in the final months of the war. Beyond the direct connection of new medal winners, such articles illustrate the renewed focus on women as feminine, domestic, and rear-area contributors to the impending victory, in contrast to the silence about the final surge of women recruited into the Red Army’s fighting ranks.

The novel Mother Heroine ideal that emerged in wartime contained the familiar prewar theme of Soviet pronatalism.<sup>92</sup> The wartime ideal was not a case of old wine in a new bottle, however, as significant differences appeared from the outset, reflecting both the wartime policy context and the gendering of propaganda messages aimed at a frontline audience. Material aid or bonuses appeared in propaganda to legitimize the Soviet state, as they had in the 1930s, but in wartime, articles such as “Aid to the families of frontline soldiers” targeted fathers, rather than mothers, by explaining that their families received special attention in the rear, implicitly as a reward for frontline service.<sup>93</sup> Mother Heroines themselves were different from the exemplary

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<sup>90</sup> “On the awarding of multi-child mothers with the order of “Maternal glory” and the medal “Medal of maternity”” *Krasnaia Zvezda* 7 December 1944, p2 and “On the awarding of multi-child mothers with the honorary title “Mother Heroine,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 27 December 1944, 1.

<sup>91</sup> “Soviet Patriot Matrena Shafranova,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 1 March 1945, 2.

<sup>92</sup> David Hoffman, *Stalinist Family Values* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), Chapter 3, especially 101-102.

<sup>93</sup> On 1930s aid and bonuses, see Hoffman (2005), 101-102. Regarding wartime aid, the article explained how Rostov Oblast had collected for a “fund to aid the families of defenders of the Motherland” and Nikolaev Raion had enacted a “voluntary Sunday of aid to the families of servicemen and invalids of the Patriotic war. “Aid to the families of frontline soldiers,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 22 December 1944, 2.

women of the 1930s, as their heroic output of children no longer accompanied productive working lives: their production of soldiers for wartime received much greater emphasis.<sup>94</sup> Publicized women such as medal-winning Novosibirsk housewife Kseniia P. Pokryshkina, as well as the subject of “9 Sons – 9 fighters,” Evdokiia V. Ilina, a pensioner, made this clear.<sup>95</sup> The fact that their lack of other contributions to the war effort provided no barrier to hero status speaks to the value placed on motherhood in wartime, and its difference from the prewar ideal of Soviet worker-mothers.

As usual, front coverage of International Women’s Day in 1945 acted as once-yearly acknowledgement of the breadth of women’s contributions to the war effort. Nevertheless, the advent of wartime pro-natalism focused coverage on Soviet mothers and their fertility as foremost among women’s contributions. The editorial connected the significance of women’s contribution to the success of Red Army troops, because “Every Red Army warrior, with great reverence and love, preserves the image of his mother in battle. He understands what it means to [undertake] daily, long-hour tasks, a life, full of alarm for a father or husband, a son or brother, fighting at the front, lovingly raising children in the conditions of wartime life!”<sup>96</sup> *Krasnaia Zvezda* presented women’s maternal duties, without other labor, as analogous to their male relatives’ service at the front, and thus elevated motherhood above women’s other contributions, and reinforced the status of the Mother Heroine title as a counterpart to the Hero of the Soviet Union honor for soldiers.

This final wartime discussion of Soviet women’s wartime contributions on 8 March continued to prioritize a maternal, rear-only femininity that was reproductive rather than

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<sup>94</sup> On 1930s ideals of Soviet motherhood, see Chatterjee, 150-151.

<sup>95</sup> “Mother of three-time hero decorated with ‘Medal of Maternity,’” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 27 March 1945, 3. No mention is made of Ilina’s former career. “9 Sons – 9 fighters,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 24 March, 1945, 2.

<sup>96</sup> “The great exploit of Soviet women,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 8 March, 1945, 1.

productive or destructive. Such an approach prefigured postwar silences about women combatants, and seemed unworkable as an actual vocation for women given the needs and privations of the war effort. As an emphasized femininity, the Mother Heroine provided a final counterpart to the masculine soldierly ideal, whatever its late war form. The emphasized feminine ideal also recast Soviet pro-natalist propaganda as an appeal to soldiers that showed state care for families as a benefit received for military service.

Among Red Army troops, Soviet women also figured more prominently in the final months of the war, but with a distinct focus on those at the front. This new expression of interest in women comprised part of the post-liberation shift in soldierly subjectivities. Examining soldiers' views of their front experiences through the theoretical framework of a masculine bloc reveals the complexity of their relationships with official ideals and their own commanders. Grounding such a study in theories of combat motivation helps explain how and why soldiers excluded women in their articulation of individual soldierly subjectivities and frontline collectives in most units, but accepted them in rare cases.<sup>97</sup> Feeling a greater sense of separation from women in the rear and less dedication to the Red Army's revised war aims, heterosexual romance (which involved varying degrees of coercion) emerged as a preeminent concern just as the number of women at the front peaked. Male soldiers ascribed separate motives to men and women engaged in romantic relationships that reaffirmed masculine power and superiority at the front based on an exclusively masculine definition of comradeship and combatant status. A masculine soldierly subjectivity resulted, and denied front women equal status, regardless of training, position, or performance in combat. Like the Mother Heroine ideal of official rhetoric,

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<sup>97</sup> Lynn's theory of motivation includes establishes three universal collectives: national system, military unit, and primary group, 24-25. Soviet women who integrated into their units without serious sexual harassment, or served in all female detachments, are the focus of Krylova's study.

the Auxiliary-Lover femininity articulated by soldiers after liberation proved to be the final word on Soviet women's roles and the gendering of duty during the war.

Many Red Army combat veterans found themselves newly able to interact with the growing numbers of Red Army women in the summer and fall of 1944, as the conditions of supply, medical care, and entertainment for frontline units improved. As part of a larger shift in wartime opinion discussed above, soldiers overwhelmingly considered these interactions as opportunities to fulfill long-denied romantic and sexual interests. In her work on the "gaze," Laura Mulvey claims that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly."<sup>98</sup> Red Army troops often described their encounters in this way, as Lieutenant Pyl'syn described his treatment for a leg wound:

I thought that my new doctor was rather cute. Captain of Medical Corps Rodina, that was her last name, was an amazingly slim, bright brunette of amazing beauty, with large brown eyes and beautiful rich hair under a *pilotka* that fitted her very well. We sang the song about the Motherland which had a line saying "We love our Motherland like a bride," much more often than any other songs.<sup>99</sup>

While extraordinary in its detail, Pyl'syn's assessment of his doctor is typical of frontline soldiers' reactions to meeting new women at the front, in which they focused on physical qualities, and sexual attractiveness eclipsed all other characteristics. The evacuation of wounded soldiers just behind the lines in liberated Byelorussia and Ukraine was a common site of such encounters in the war's final months, as one mortar crewman recalled his comrades' unambiguous reaction to meeting their nurses: "The men are staring at the women around them. Some soldiers have not seen a female face for a couple of years. The women begin with soaping

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<sup>98</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 no.3 (1975): 6-18.

<sup>99</sup> Aleksandr V. Pyl'tsyn, *Shtrafnoi Udar* [Penalty Strike] (Moscow: Znanie, 2003), 76.

the heads of the wounded, so they would not be looking them with those begging, eager eyes.”<sup>100</sup>

Their potential as sexual objects, whatever the actual outcome, consistently framed mentions of Red Army women in the late-war phase of male soldiers’ recollections, interview talks, and letters.

Soldiers rarely wrote about romantic or sexual interests in letters from the front, since their primary audience was female relatives. However, on the occasions they did broach the subject, the pattern endured. “That’s all of our news, the squad wants to return to Ukraine, it was of course better to fight there and all the women were more agreeable,” as an artilleryman fighting in Yugoslavia wrote to his wounded comrade in hospital.<sup>101</sup> For such soldiers, the pursuit of women emerged as a central preoccupation along with rest between operations or recovery from wounds:

“The war continued but life was going on, too. You should understand: we were gals and young guys. Not far from the tents on a hillock an awning was constructed for storing hay. So, towards evenings, guys and girls stole away into it,” “...[and we] became acquainted with local girls and disappeared into the village even during nights. ... I don’t remember any objections from the hospital personnel against the self-reliance of their patients.”<sup>102</sup>

These romantic and sexual pursuits marked a distinct period in the war experience of many Red Army fighters. They afforded soldiers a sense of autonomy and even power amidst the heightened atmosphere of compulsion that characterized post-liberation service. By expressing and acting on their personal interests, male troops’ encounters with frontline women preserved a gendered power dynamic in which men maintained their active role in the war effort, first as defenders, then as pursuers of women. Red Army women remained the passive objects of male

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<sup>100</sup> Mansur Abdulin, *Red Road from Stalingrad* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2004), 150.

<sup>101</sup> Letter from A.A. Voinalovich to Boris P. Kustov, 10 October 1944. RGASPI M-33 Opis 1 Delo 1161 List 10.

<sup>102</sup> Recollections of Victor N. Vargin in Drabkin (2009), 227; Evgenii D. Moniushko, *From Leningrad to Hungary* (London: Routledge, 2005), 110.

attention, after being the passive victims of enemy violence, which diffused the potential threat of women's penetration of the masculine front realm.

Soldiers and officers in a given Red Army unit seemed to hold similar views of frontline women. However, the men's rank shaped how they acted towards the women they encountered, as did their perceptions of each others' behavior.<sup>103</sup> Red Army troops expressed little concern with officers' interest in sexual relationships at the front, as one explained: "I cannot comment on different stories related to the "campaign wives" at the front. The fact is that there were no couples of such sort at the level of platoon commanders, at least in our regiment."<sup>104</sup> However, fighting men proved unforgiving of officers who placed their own interests above the concerns of the unit or its mission. An artillery commander thus earned the scorn of his men when he left his unit mired in mud, and his soldiers were happy to inform his superiors about his behavior at the first opportunity: "our battalion commander was just passing through here with some Polish mademoiselle and forced our guns off the road. That's how we got stuck."<sup>105</sup> A junior Lieutenant recounted in detail his feelings about having to serve as lookout while his Regimental Commissar's lover visited:

The regimental doctor, Lidia Nikolaevna, was coming to visit Ivan Iakovlevich; I was to take a post in front the dugout and not let anyone enter. My sentry duty lasted for almost three hours. "Damn it, what does he think I am?" I cursed to myself. What I encountered on my first day in my new position, seemed shameless to me, especially after life on the front lines. I decided there and then, as I stood in the cold outside the door, to contrast everything I would see in the future among the top brass with [my] life at the front. Did Tolia Razumov also stand guard over the amorous affairs of the commissar? I told myself next time I would refuse such an assignment.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> While I consider soldiers primarily as enlisted men up to the rank of Lieutenant, I include NCOs promoted to the level of commission officer if their self-perception and primary tasks at the front remained combat-centered, rather than organizational or staff-related, since the war on the Eastern Front, even in its late stages, sometimes demanded that Captains personally act as combat leaders on a regular basis.

<sup>104</sup> Recollections of Ivan D. Zabolotnyi in Drabkin (2009), 277.

<sup>105</sup> Nikolai Litvin, *800 Days on the Eastern Front* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 124.

<sup>106</sup> Boris Gorbachevsky, *Through the Maelstrom* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 221.

Such sentiments were typical of combatant soldiers and NCOs who experienced officers' prioritization of sex and romance. Troops aspired to a higher standard of conduct than officers exhibited in their relations with women. Rank-and-file men did not seek to treat women differently, but wished to put their comrades first, which signaled the importance of collectively-established norms to their sense of self.

Rank-and-file men emphasized the selfish character and acts of personal indulgence that distinguished officers and the women they pursued from collectively-oriented fighters. Yet some troops found that the late war provided two avenues for the rank and file to pursue sexual partners without compromising their duty to their comrades: being wounded after the mid-war expansion of medical care, and the liberation of deported Soviet women on foreign soil.<sup>107</sup> A married penalty battalion lieutenant sympathetically observed his comrades pursue both: Our nurse was a Tatar girl Aza, a well-educated and knowledgeable person. It was interesting to talk to her, and soon relations between her and Nikolai grew into something more than friendship" in 1944, and then in 1945, what he described as the "call of the flesh." "So I could understand George when he failed to date the beautiful young Polish girl Stefa and then switched his attention to a Russian woman. She was a repatriate as we called women who came back from German slavery or concentration camps. Stefa was thin, starved, unattractive and noticeably pregnant."<sup>108</sup> In both cases, fighting men could undertake such liaisons without behaving as dishonorably as their officers had, because they did not pursue women at the expense of their duty.

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<sup>107</sup> Immediate care, requiring more staff near the front, expanded in 1943 to save lives and return a higher percentage of soldiers to combat duty. Amnon Sella, *The Value of Human Life in Soviet Warfare* (London Routledge, 1992), 80-81.

<sup>108</sup> Pyl'tsyn, 77, 123-124.



Although few memoirs or interviews more than hint at it, soldiers asserted informal superiority over their officers by competing with the latter for Red Army women as lovers. Such competition typically hinged on the official status of women holding low ranks spending time with rank-and-file soldiers as well as or before moving away from the forward-most positions at the front to the safer quarters of officers. In one such case, Tasia, a telephone operator, having become the lover of Captain Bondarchuk, quickly became the lover of a Lieutenant, Savushkin, once Bondarchuk was ordered to army headquarters temporarily. As one might expect, “when Bondarchuk returned, Savushkin tried to arrange Tasia’s ‘transfer’ back to him, as the battalion’s official roster stipulated. That attempt just caused a fit of rage and a torrent of threats from the major.” While she remained the lover of both men, Savushkin, the younger and apparently more handsome of the two, refused to end his relationship with Tasia, and faced the wrath of the “jealous and vengeful major,” receiving no new decorations or promotions for the rest of the war.<sup>109</sup> Red Army women could thus provide soldiers and NCOs with the means to claim power outside of the military rank hierarchy. Male soldiers and officers shared a view of women at the front as sexual partners first and foremost, so that ensuing conflicts over soldiers’ equal pursuit of those women played out as a conflict between men, not as insubordination or indiscipline. Overall, the motives and differences soldiers ascribed to officers’ behavior with frontline women constituted part of their self-definition as fighting men. Within a masculine-dominated frontline hierarchy, soldiers asserted group solidarity and moral superiority separate from the system of rank that officers dominated.

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<sup>109</sup> Despite their identical interest in Tasia, Bondarchuk, as the senior officer, is remembered as “that beast.” In contrast, Savushkin, who despite his relationship “performed all requisite actions fearlessly and diligently throughout the war,” thus preserving his bonds with his fellow soldiers. Isaak Kobylanskiy, *From Stalingrad to Pillau* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 229-230.

Male soldiers assumed that women's unwillingness to deal with the harsh realities of front life motivated female soldiers to engage in sexual relationships. Troops freely ascribed motives to women based on assumptions or rumors and generalized about all women at the front based only on information or gossip about women in their units, thus asserting a gendered binary about participation in sexual relationships.<sup>110</sup> As one soldier explained about the 20 women who served in his rifle regiment: "usually, women didn't refuse such a fate and agreed readily... It was clear in advance that any commanders' *PPZh* [field wives] would have privileges not only in protection but also, within the limits of what was possible at the front, to have a dry warm shelter and a steady supply of food."<sup>111</sup> Worse still, these soldiers asserted, were those women who sought to leave not only the firing line but the front altogether: "There was talk at that time that some servicewomen became pregnant purposely – to leave the frontline's risks and difficulties," and "another woman of our brigade became pregnant and left *for her home*," and "she wanted to get pregnant and as such be released and go home."<sup>112</sup> These alleged motives thus constituted the core of a frontline femininity which provided sharp contrast to combatant norms, since fighting men remained acutely aware that "Unless heavily wounded and afterward released from hospitals, soldiers could not normally go home for any period of time, even if they had been on the front for many months or years."<sup>113</sup> Casting judgment using their norms of frontline behavior, Red Army men thus used the subject of sex to diminish the status of women and complicit officers.

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<sup>110</sup> In a variety of contexts, gossip provides groups with a means of excluding others and solidifying a group identity based around gender or class. Amy Milne-Smith, "Club Talk: Gossip, Masculinity, and Oral Communities in Late Nineteenth-Century London" *Gender and History* 21:1 (April, 2009): 86-106.

<sup>111</sup> This was the term for campaign wives, «полевая походная жена» literally "field marching wife," an indirect play on the sounds of the abbreviation for a common machine gun, PPSH, but without any similarity in the unabbreviated words. Kobylyanskiy, 229.

<sup>112</sup> Recollections of Nikolai A. Chistakov in Drabkin (2009), 26.

<sup>113</sup> Temkin, 202.

Soldiers thus ascribed the selfishness to frontline women as well as feminine softness in dealing with front conditions in order to separate them from the combat collective and assert the power of male fighters. For soldiers who “divided all men into two categories: *frontoviks* and all others,” women seeking the rear or even home appeared as antithetical figures in the war effort, earning declarations that “I felt pity for young girls in forward front lines” as much as respect and inclusion.<sup>114</sup> Such critical judgments can also be seen as an effort by soldiers to restore the power relationship between women, who seemed to be able without fail to make gains using sexuality, and the men, mostly officers, who allowed them to do so in slavish obedience to their carnal desires.<sup>115</sup> As external and incorruptible observers, those fighters condemned women’s apparent manipulation on grounds of soldierly morality, while themselves adhering to the combat collective’s standard of only pursuing sex when it would not come at the expense of fulfilling one’s duty.

The oppositional nature of the masculine combat collective found its greatest expression in the figurative and functional disqualification of Red Army women fighters. Unlike that of non-combatants, women fighters’ daily presence on the firing line, and avowed combatant role, provided a greater challenge to the masculine values and solidarities that underpinned frontline units. Nevertheless, male fighters identified military policies favoring frontline women as a means to maintain their status in the frontline hierarchy. Take the example of penalty battalions institutionalized under Stalin’s order 227. As one Junior Lieutenant explained concisely: “There was the strictest order not to send women to penal battalions,” while men accused of the same

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<sup>114</sup> Mikhin, 12; Temkin, 202.

<sup>115</sup> The problem of women rupturing wartime bonds among male comrades emerged as a central concern of Soviet fiction about the Russian Civil War, anticipating the challenges of the Eastern Front by a decade. Eliot Borenstein, *Men Without Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 47.

infractions were sent precisely to face what seemed a certain death.<sup>116</sup> This exact contrast in order played itself out in late 1944, when a divisional newspaper editor, Captain Berezkin, was “sent to a punishment battalion for three months... and the proofreader, a woman, was discharged from the army and sent home” because a typographical error in a divisional newspaper reduced Stalin to the title of “равно-командующий.”<sup>117</sup> Other, more local policies gave men similar reasons to count their female comrades as separate, as in a mixed-gender air regiment, where a pair of pilots discussed the evening’s flight duty: “The girls from the regiment led by Evdokia Bershanskaia usually flew at that time to attack Kerch, but we did not hear the engines roar. ‘Our ‘owls’ must be forbidden to fly in such weather,’ said Nikolai.”<sup>118</sup> Whether all-army or unit-specific, such regulations presented Red Army men with a cohort of female comrades shielded, however partially, from some of the dangers and hardships they defined as aspects of soldiering and the responses that shaped a masculine soldierly subjectivity.

Male soldiers likewise proved keenly aware of cases of favoritism shown to female soldiers, whether provided by negligent comrades or cultivated by women themselves. In an artillery unit fighting in Hungary, an evening inspection of the battery revealed improperly deployed and unmanned anti-aircraft artillery, for which the captain sought an explanation:

“‘The female gunners asked to set up near us, Comrade Captain, so they wouldn’t have to dig emplacements in the frozen ground... They’re warming up inside our guys’ huts, Comrade Captain’... ‘You are quite the gentleman, Senior Lieutenant! You felt sorry for the girls and practically let them into your beds together with their machine guns! Remove them immediately!’”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Pyl’tsyn, 143.

<sup>117</sup> Rather than supreme commander, or commander in chief, the published version described Stalin as the English equivalent of ‘shit commander’ instead of the intended ‘supreme commander’. The editor subsequently died in battle near Budapest in November 1944. Dmitriy Loza, *Fighting for the Soviet Motherland* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 113-115.

<sup>118</sup> Vasily B. Emelianenko, *Red Star Against the Swastika* (London: Greenhill Books, 2006), 228.

<sup>119</sup> Mikhin, 193.

The women's request for a dangerous shortcut in deploying their weapons, and the implied carousing that followed, prompted sharp criticism of both the men and women involved. The favoritism men showed to female combatants compromised the shared norms of the combat collective by prioritizing the interests of sub-groups and creating separate relationships among pairs of soldiers that withdrew them from the larger group. As with non-combatant women, male soldiers' perceptions, assumptions, and gossip, rather than female fighters' actual battle performance, shaped men's responses to the growth of women combatants in their midst.

The ultimate disqualification for female fighters as equal comrade combatants rested on their role as objects of male soldiers' heterosexual desire, which was in no way limited to non-combatant women. Men at the front considered the primary difference between women's and men's bodies at the front to be the potential for heterosexual sex partners, rather than physical capabilities in combat.<sup>120</sup> This difference constantly appeared in soldiers' descriptions of frontline women: "Soon there came a blonde with a child's face and full lips... her boots sat well on her slender legs, and her wasp waist was laced with a wide belt."<sup>121</sup> Along with the bodily difference that distinguished women combatants was the resulting heterosexual desire it produced, which was incompatible with the combatant solidarity that had developed within units. An infantry NCO described his unit's most sought after woman "...she was the eighteen-year-old blonde Olya Martynova, a former inhabitant of the city of Rostov-on-Don. She was short, chubby, and blue-eyed. So, if she hadn't been wearing a soldier's uniform and boots, one would have taken her for a senior high school student." He explained how: "From the first hour of serving in a unit like our regiment, every woman became a subject of undisguised craving. Very

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<sup>120</sup> For one of the most significant studies of gendered bodies in warfare, see Christina S. Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), which draws from body studies scholarship such as Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>121</sup> Emelianenko, 90.

few of them remained without a sexual partner.”<sup>122</sup> Male soldiers thus saw women combatants as sex-objects-in-uniform, utterly unlike their male comrades. They witnessed officers treating Red Army women this way, and never forgot the distinction.

Even the actual performance of combat roles provided no guarantee that male fighters would see frontline women as combatants and equals. In fact, male troops’ perception of Red Army women as sex objects or officers’ playthings could persist even when those women lost much of that potential, becoming instead something very close to fantasy.<sup>123</sup> A junior artillery commander thus remembered how he was awakened in hospital:

They were putting someone next to me and the patients nearby were shouting: ‘the lieutenant got lucky, there is a beautiful young girl lying next to him!’ After some effort I managed to turn and felt something hard next to me: it was a female medic, a lieutenant, and her entire body was covered in plaster. Only her face remained visible. The girl was unconscious, but her face moved from time to time in pain.<sup>124</sup>

This sexualized view of a wounded frontline woman and persistent denial of her status as combatant comrade shows how male troops could ignore both the shared toll of battle and the obvious sacrifice such women made. These men’s perceptions fit both the physical desires of male soldiers experiencing extended separation from women and a masculine subjectivity formed around the combat collective. As women entered established all-male combat units, men persisted in behavior that re-affirmed their combat collectives as masculine and thus separate from the military collective, which had ceased to be predominantly male, and from the national collective, which had never been exclusively male.<sup>125</sup>

Women’s efforts to gain acceptance as Red Army fighters were not hopeless, however. The same primary group dynamics that led to women’s exclusion or marginalization as sex

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<sup>122</sup> Kobylanskiy, 227.

<sup>123</sup> Mulvey, 10-11.

<sup>124</sup> Ivan Yakushin, *On the Roads of War* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2005), 44.

<sup>125</sup> Lynn, 24-25.

objects also enabled women's acceptance and inclusion.<sup>126</sup> Each cohesive combat unit in the Red Army could vary in its collective norms and expectations, and in particular the extent to which notions of soldierly and manly differed. In units mobilized as all-women or integrated formations, this could develop organically. The presence of more gender-inclusive officers and standards, or sufficient time for men to adjust and women to overcome old norms, also enabled women to earn equal status in predominantly male combat units, particularly for those women arriving early in the war and establishing the image of a competent female combatant, instead of a superfluous object of lust.<sup>127</sup>

For women arriving to the front later in the war, or in small numbers, where sexual relationships between soldiers and the non-combatant women present already predominated, gaining the respect and acceptance could prove more difficult, or even impossible.<sup>128</sup> The best response available consisted of strict celibacy and uncompromising avoidance of any special treatment. In a moment of outrage, a woman sniper succinctly expressed her frustration with the gap between her actual motives and what men in her unit expected of her:

You think that it is far better for a young woman at the front to trade in her sniper's rifle for a submachine-gun and become the bodyguard of her field husband? To live in a safe shelter, to clatter around in a vehicle; after all it's much more peaceful than to fire a rifle at Germany infantry. ...Never! What, you don't understand? I'm a sniper and I'll stay as one. That's why I headed to the front in the first place.<sup>129</sup>

Women combatants opted for this approach in order to be taken seriously as combatants, despite the fact that a female fighter might face "endless importunate (sometimes even compulsory) demands from her comrades for sexual intimacy, which she had experienced from the day when

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<sup>126</sup> Lynn, 30-31.

<sup>127</sup> For these particular cases, see Krylova, 282-287.

<sup>128</sup> Snipers, for example, trained individually and fought in pairs, and were thus small groups entering much larger infantry units as replacements, where masculine combat collectives and sexualized relations with non-combatant women already prevailed. Recollections of Nikolai D. Nadol'ko in Drabkin (2009), 158-59.

<sup>129</sup> The sniper, Zina Stroyeva, seemed to have some romantic interest in the married memoirist, but she remained true to her principles. Joseph Pilyushin, *Red Sniper on the Eastern Front* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2010), 154-55.

she first joined.”<sup>130</sup> While these determined refusals could eventually result in acceptance as a fighting equal, they still reflected an oppositional gender dynamic and double standard in which a masculine combatant culture remained preeminent at the front. Women had to remain chaste fighters, while men did not. Moreover, the terms of inclusion and exclusion in the combat collective remained a masculine prerogative, whereby combatant women had to avoid the trap of disqualifying sexual relations, which allowed those masculine values to endure, even if they made equality possible for only a select few women.<sup>131</sup> In this way, men sought to minimize the disruptive potential possessed by women combatants. The disqualification through sex of women as equal combatants and members of the combat collective minimized the challenge to Red Army fighters’ romance-infused masculine soldierly subjectivity.

The prevailing ideas about Soviet women in front and rear underwent a transformation after liberation that emphasized feminine roles subordinate to the combat duties of masculine heroes. The creation of the Mother Heroine ideal and series of medals is significant as a disavowal of women’s wartime contributions in favor of a pro-natalist agenda that foreshadowed postwar developments. The Mother Heroine also complemented frontline newspapers’ renewed emphasis on Stalin’s paternal role within a national Soviet family, and a corresponding disavowal of earlier coverage of women combatants as well as the gender equality rhetoric of the 1930s. The rank and file emphasized masculine values of their own, which coalesced around an “Auxiliary-Lover” femininity in relations with women at the front. Soldiers’ assertions that women systematically avoided hardship and sacrifice sought to preserve the power of combat collectives to define frontline culture and norms of soldierly behavior. These combat collectives

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<sup>130</sup> Kobylanskiy, 228.

<sup>131</sup> Such practices were an evolution from Red Army practices in the Russian Civil War. Women’s status was contingent on what the larger male group decided, and their approach usually categorized women as revered figures on a pedestal or uselessly unmanly, but almost never simply equals. Borenstein, 47-48.



adapted to the conditions of the late war, which meant greater criticism for the swelling ranks of logistical and support staff that followed combat formations onto foreign soil. Ultimately, frontline propaganda's redoubled feminization of the rear, and men's interpretation of growing numbers of women at the front appear as two parts of a masculine bloc, which sought to preserve masculine values and the image of a war effort anchored in the superiority of Stalin's leadership and the heroic fighting men he inspired.

### **Stalinist victory and sexual violence**

Despite the problems masculine frontline culture created for Red Army women, the violent dimensions of male soldiers' attitudes toward sex fully emerged only after the liberation of Soviet territory. Stalin's infamous comment to visiting Yugoslav Communist Milovan Djilas about rape reflected many soldiers' and officers' perspective: "And what is so awful in [a Red Army soldier] having fun with a woman, after such [wartime] horrors?"<sup>132</sup> However, his flippant response concealed a pragmatic concern for the impact that such violent sexual behavior, typically categorized as "marauding," had on the war effort and Soviet postwar objectives in central Europe.<sup>133</sup> In late 1944, the Red Army rank-and-file perpetrated a wave of rape and other atrocities that appear as a grotesque evolution, rather than new development, in the norms of masculine sexual behavior at the front. Troops' opportunities to sexually assault female civilians coincided with a shift in wartime opinion at the front. Combatants' new perspective consisted of diminished hopes for surviving the war along with a heightened focus on the interests and solidarities of their combat collectives. These conflicting priorities resulted in a series of

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<sup>132</sup> Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1962), 110.

<sup>133</sup> These goals had changed more than once over the course of the war, but by the time the Red Army was fighting its way to Berlin in February, reparations were a key goal. Stalin sought reparations for the destruction of Soviet industry, aimed to gain as much technological knowledge as possible, and prevent future German war-making capabilities. Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 9-10.

changes to Red Army disciplinary policy and propaganda that sought to restrain soldiers' behavior and encourage their loyalty to a national family with Stalin at its head. Nevertheless, fighting men's physical separation and sense of alienation from their loved ones left many acting like they had nothing to lose but the approval of their comrades.

The motives and actions of idealized heroes depicted in frontline propaganda underwent their final wartime change in the winter of 1945. The encouragement of indiscriminate revenge on the enemy in *Krasnaia Zvezda* editorials such as "Revenge and Death for the Hitlerite Scum" and "Crush the Fascist Reptile!" came to an end once the harmful consequences of soldiers' actions became undeniable.<sup>134</sup> On 9 February, the editorial "Our Revenge" revised official expectations for troops fighting in Germany while openly acknowledging the vitriol of past rhetoric. To break with those practices, the editorial asserted a form of vengeance focused on strategic objectives, particularly reparations: "To take revenge on the Hitlerites, we, on the other hand, should strive to save from destruction and burning the greatest possible quantity of industrial enterprises and material goods of the enemy." The editorial contrasted this new ideal of Red Army behavior with that from earlier in the war, when "hatred was an additional weapon of ours," as well as with the Germans' conduct as invaders. A new emphasis on discipline anchored this redefinition of vengeance, with the exaltation of "conscious and unshakeable discipline" and warnings that "without discipline there can be no army." A single example of indiscipline offered in the article distinguishes these otherwise standard calls for discipline, presented as an explicit contrast between Soviet and German fighters: "It is unacceptable to argue that the fascist two-legged beasts have raped our women publically or engaged in

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<sup>134</sup> "Revenge and Death to the Hitlerite Scum," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 23 December 1944, 1; "Crush the Fascist Reptile!" *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 23 January 1945, 1.

marauding, so that we in revenge should do the same to them.”<sup>135</sup> This appeal for Soviet troops to be more honorable men and more calculating conquerors than the Germans reveals at once a forward-looking effort to begin Soviet reconstruction and an optimistic effort to revise how exhausted and angry Soviet troops prosecuted the war effort in its final weeks.

Soviet leaders sought to change soldiers’ motives and conduct in order to maintain the Red Army’s combat effectiveness and achieve Soviet foreign policy goals. Three weeks before the “Our Revenge” editorial mentioned the need to avoid unnecessary destruction, the Red Army approved plans for massive confiscations of Germany industrial and financial property as reparations, for which they diverted considerable transportation resources for the upcoming Berlin operation and elite military personnel for “reliable protection of all of the above property.”<sup>136</sup> The adaptation of Red Army political work to suit these new objectives, and to deal with the larger problem of declining morale after liberation, proved challenging for political workers. Army Commissar Lev Mekhlis criticized his subordinates for not explaining the new situation to the rank-and-file and for the persistence of disciplinary problems in the weeks that followed:

It is not clear that in this defensive, just war we should leave [our land] and emerge the victor. It is not clear that it is our duty to force the enemy to compensate for the damage to our motherland. Soldiers and officers should know that we are waging war on foreign soil in the name of our interests alone, that we are only incidentally are we solving the problem of the liberation of Poland and Czechoslovakia.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> “Our Revenge,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 8 February 1945, 1.

<sup>136</sup> NKO Order #284, “On the use of captured national economic assets,” 19 January 1945, signed by Chief of Red Army Logistics General A. Hrulev and Deputy People’s Commissar of Defense General N. Bulganin. TsAMO Fond 4 Opis 11 Delo 79 Listy 17-24.

<sup>137</sup> Lev Mekhlis, Speech to political workers of the 38<sup>th</sup> Army, 5 March 1945. RGASPI Fond 386 Opis 1 Delo 224 Listy 10-11.

While such efforts aimed at one side of the problem, punishment for rape remained perfunctory, and internal Red Army documents dismissed many charges as “fascist propaganda.”<sup>138</sup> Since Soviet leaders prioritized combat effectiveness, only incidents that disrupted operations received serious attention, and the punishment of penalty battalion duty lost much of its risk in the war’s final weeks, especially for officers who were transferred to command positions.<sup>139</sup> The manner in which Red Army leaders pursued a new disciplinary standard reveals their focus on strategic and macroeconomic developments and only a tangential interest in the vicious turn in frontline culture.

Frontline propaganda ceased to celebrate the merciless “Total Warrior” as a hero at the same time it placed renewed emphasis on Stalin’s wartime leadership and role in the victorious course of the war effort overall. The Red Army men fighting their way through Germany were expected to learn of a new way to fight the enemy, which “Stalinist commanding genius” and “the laws of Stalinist military science” made possible. Stalin provided this, the newspapers explained, in terms of paternal care: “The way is before us, sons of the great Soviet state.”<sup>140</sup> This new approach complemented the recent emphasis on restraint, and espoused qualities and behaviors relevant to occupation as well as battle, where success now demanded that its practitioners possessed “marvelous cool-headedness [*замечательным хладнокровием*], clarity of thought, and the ability to overcome any obstacle.”<sup>141</sup> For this new hero, the “Conscious Combatant,” the use of Stalin’s new tactics insured both victory and survival, just as Stalin’s leadership had outmatched Hitler’s on the strategic level. The battle exploits that distinguished

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<sup>138</sup> Report of the Deputy Head of the Central Political Administration of the Red Army to the Central Committee, 30 April 1945. RGASPI Fond 17 Opis 125 Delo 321 List 10.

<sup>139</sup> Top Secret Report of General Golikov to Deputy Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars, Comrade Molotov, 3 April 1945. RGASPI Fond 82 Opis 2 Delo 804 List 86.

<sup>140</sup> “On the Eve of the 27<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Red Army,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 10 February 1945, 1.

<sup>141</sup> “Frontline meeting of Heroes of the Soviet Union,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 2 March 1945, 3.

examples of the “Conscious Combatant” centered not on specific acts, but on an individual hero’s decisive achievement of victory “in battle against the numerically superior forces of the enemy,” or a small unit that “was victorious in battle with [only] eight insignificant casualties.”<sup>142</sup> Most importantly, thanks to Stalin’s inspiration, “in critical minutes the heroic spirit of Soviet warriors burns especially bright” and Stalin “kindled fire in the hearts [зажигать сердца] of Soviet warriors to new exploits.”<sup>143</sup> Frontline propaganda’s presentation of the new ideal hero again invoked Stalin’s authority to justify the new priorities of restoring morale and heightening discipline.<sup>144</sup>

The “Conscious Combatant” hero’s emergence in frontline propaganda also served to reassert Stalin’s paternal authority and respond to soldiers’ recent feelings of isolation and acts of indiscipline.<sup>145</sup> Beyond inspiration, Stalin provided soldiers with a symbolic father figure amidst a sudden proliferation of articles about biological brothers at the front in the spring of 1945. With biological fathers absent, young men such as the Boiko brothers appealed to Stalin “to participate in the destruction of the enemy and asked for permission to go to the front in their own tank”, and dutifully reported to fellow villagers about successes in the training Stalin had made possible, such as “Yesterday was my first live fire exercise. All shells landed on target.”<sup>146</sup> Stalin’s personal role in bringing soldiers to battle and harmonizing their interests with national priorities extended to the ultimate objectives in fighting around Berlin. A decorated cavalryman, quoted in *Krasnaia Zvezda*, explained the importance of collective success over individual needs

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<sup>142</sup> “Honor and glory to the heroes of the offensive!” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 16 February 1945, 1; “Frontline meeting of Heroes of the Soviet Union,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 16 February 1945, 1.

<sup>143</sup> “Honor and glory to heroes of the offensive!” and “On the Enemy’s Land,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 7 March 1945, p3

<sup>144</sup> For heroism distinguished by kill count-centered exploits yet based in spontaneous action at the front, see the “Stakhanovite-at-arms” discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>145</sup> Just as Mekhlis explained to Army-level political workers, in March, *Krasnaia Zvezda* acknowledged that “The new conditions of troops’ military actions have raised new tasks for Red Army newspapers.” This admission appeared in a recurring section entitled “Press Examples,” which highlighted the best work in divisional newspapers on individual fronts. “On Enemy Territory,” *Krasnaia Zvezda* 7 March 1945, 3.

<sup>146</sup> “Tank crew of Boiko brother-patriots,” *Krasnaia Zvezda* 21 March 1945, 3.

to his unit: “I am appealing to headquarters to request that they order us to return to battle again today. In the name of the great military leader Comrade Stalin we will set off for the final decisive assault.”<sup>147</sup> On the same page, an infantryman in fighting around Berlin obliquely addressed the need to avoid rape and other atrocities: “Comrade Stalin calls on us to be especially vigilant, to strictly preserve the honor and dignity of a Soviet warrior. We assure comrade Stalin, that we will fulfill all of his orders.”<sup>148</sup> Stalin’s central place in troops’ efforts to win the war appeared to reconnect individual soldiers to the collective war effort, rather than fight in pursuit of personal interests and impulses that had plagued the Red Army for months.

To complement Stalin’s guidance of soldier-sons to victory, frontline propaganda briefly revived the task of liberating Soviet daughters as an objective alongside the total defeat of the enemy. President Kalinin presented such an appeal in his Red Army Day message: “the torment of our girls in a German prison, the tears of mothers of murdered children, the blood of millions of unparalleled ferocity extermination of people - call our army forward to complete victory over the fascist monsters.”<sup>149</sup> The revival of this message, that the war effort remained a masculine endeavor to save Soviet women, gained a second purpose once the under-acknowledged concern over Red Army soldiers’ behavior in regard to German women arose. Dual-purpose articles appeared, reviving the encounter story so common in 1943, in which Red Army troops met Soviet civilians and liberated them. In 1945, such encounters occurred on the Oder, not the Don, as one tale of suffering explained: “Out from the cellar of a burned-down house jumped a half-naked [полуобнаженная], barefoot girl. Crying and laughing, she threw herself into the arms of

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<sup>147</sup> “The words and deeds guards –soldiers,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 4 May 1945, 3.

<sup>148</sup> “Hold up high the honor of the Soviet Warrior,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 4 May 1945, 3.

<sup>149</sup> Archived text of “27<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army,” in *Krasnoarmeets*, February 1945, 1. RGASPI Fond 78 Opis 1 Delo 1045 List 2.

our soldiers. ‘Russians, Russians...’ she said. ‘Hello, comrades, hello, relatives’<sup>150</sup> The extremely rare description of a woman as topless evoked the specter of rape at the hands of her German captors, so that beyond the rescue of Soviet women, such articles sought to remind Red Army troops that their duty was to end the victimization of women, rather than continue it. This message complemented the gendered hierarchy of wartime roles prevalent at war’s end, which excluded active women and abject male deportees or POWs, just as it had in 1941, but with Stalin’s preeminent position restored as symbolic father to the multinational Soviet family.

The final shift of the heroic ideal presented to the Red Army drew from 1930s rhetoric of Stalinist paternal hierarchy more than any other ideal presented earlier in the war.<sup>151</sup> Without success, examples of this “Conscious Combatant” hero appeared to provide a masculine duty to heed Stalin’s fatherly wisdom and rescue feminized deportees, new tactics to mollify wartime opinion about unnecessary sacrifice after liberation, and a soldierly subjectivity affiliated with the national collective, rather than individual familial concerns or sexual interests.<sup>152</sup> Army Commissar Mekhlis and front-level newspaper editors identified most of these symptoms of demoralization correctly, but only sought to raise discipline in pursuit of postwar state ambitions and a Stalin-centered narrative of victory, rather than take fighters’ views into account in policymaking.

Fighting in enemy territory, soldiers enjoyed not only greater contact with female civilians in foreign territory, but also more time to rest and regroup between operations and a

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<sup>150</sup> “Accursed Place,” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 1 March 1945, 3.

<sup>151</sup> The “Great Family,” with Stalin at its head, emerged as the master trope of Soviet rhetoric in the mid-1930s, replacing an earlier ideal of infinite fraternity with the fathers-and-sons paradigm that reappeared so clearly in the war’s final months. Clark, 128-129.

<sup>152</sup> In line with the dynamic of internal masculine hegemony Demetriou has identified, the gendered elements of the “Conscious Combatant” did not change the power dynamic between men and women, but attempted to address perceived differences within the masculine bloc and harmonize official and soldierly elements. Demetrakis Z. Demetriou, “Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity: A critique,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 30 No. 3 (2001): 355.

diminished risk of German counter-attacks. The latter set of circumstances allowed them longer periods to reflect on, discuss, and compare their experiences and opinions with comrades. As one artilleryman explained, “many felt a hunger for some kind of group activity... the most prevailing form of our ‘homemade entertainment’ was to share ‘soldier’s tales’ within the group.” The stories these men told were not always or even regularly about war, but about women, whereby “Yakov’s stories of his numerous love affairs always attracted younger listeners” and “Senior Sergeant Vasya Panteleev also shared interesting narratives from his bachelor adventures with us.”<sup>153</sup> Since organized entertainment performances took place barely twice a year for combatants, these interactions played a central role in both deepening men’s bonds and shaping the content and values of frontline culture.<sup>154</sup> Such stories reinforced the masculine character of troops’ affiliation with the combat collective, requiring stories women could not tell, even if they had any interest in listening.

Sexual activity remained gendered in frontline culture as a source of masculine pride and feminine shame, which soldiers’ jokes consistently expressed amidst the expanded social interactions of the late war. Jokes about women marginalized their frontline role in order to reinforce the preeminent position and masculine character of those on the firing line, so that “the medal *Za Boyevie Zaslugi* (for military services) when worn by women was often derisively called *Za Polovye Zaslugi* (for sex services).”<sup>155</sup> In the largely homosocial combat collectives that shaped frontline culture, soldiers’ fondness for such jokes also reveals how sex lost some of its prewar status as a taboo subject. An artillery officer recalled the use of a standard joke formula in this vein: “Question: What is the difference between a bomb and a frontline girl?

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<sup>153</sup> Kobylanskiy, 207-208.

<sup>154</sup> Scholars examining gossip and informal conversation assert that “much of the pleasure of gossip derives from the belief that one is gaining personal information about a person or subject not known by the public at large; gossip in this way can bind people together in a network of shared information.” Milne-Smith, “Club Talk”, 87.

<sup>155</sup> Temkin, 203.



Answer: The bomb is stuffed in the rear then dispatched to the front. For a frontline girl, it's the other way around."<sup>156</sup> Women's alleged use of sex to avoid or minimize hardship, which valorized the stoicism of soldierly masculinity, appeared as a common theme, as in this rhymed saying "I fell in love with a lieutenant – he wears blue pants, [but] it turned out [he] was of little help: the sergeant major [controls] all the foodstuffs."<sup>157</sup> These jokes about women occupied a distinct subset of soldiers' humor that negatively focused inward, whether criticizing certain frontline behaviors, or certain Red Army groups within the ranks, such as rear units or Soviet Jews.<sup>158</sup> Like gossip, jokes expressed and reinforced broader values that bonded certain military men and sexualized all frontline women.

Frontline troops' increased interest in lewd entertainment stemmed, in part, from a final increase in feelings of isolation from home and a corresponding evolution in values. With their hopes for victory or discharge in 1944 dashed, soldiers' expectations for survival greatly diminished by the start of 1945, especially among infantrymen. Many recalled the scale of losses: "A company numbered up to 100 men, with detachments, etc. Yet *before* Berlin we had a total of 29 men, young boys, really."<sup>159</sup> Others remembered this in terms of those who managed to survive: "After six months as a rifleman, how could you avoid wounding or death? That made you a 'ducker.' In my company there were three men called "immortals" [неубиваемых], and

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<sup>156</sup> Kobylanskiy, 234.

<sup>157</sup> Полюбила лейтенанта – носит синие штаны,

Оказался толку мало: все продукты у старшины. Drabkin (2009), 342.

<sup>158</sup> A cavalryman recalled such an exchange of jokes criticizing alleged cowardice in the ranks: "Yes, I want to fight the war! I want to be in a supply unit on the very last carriage from the Front! Also, give me a rifle with a twisted barrel so I can fire at the enemy from behind a corner!" After that, everyone started telling jokes and funny stories. ...The company commander rallied his men for the assault, shouting, 'Forward, my eagles of Russia!' Everyone stood up, except for two Jewish soldiers. The political officer asked them: 'Why are you sitting? The whole company is advancing!' The answer was: 'We are the lions of Zion; the order was given to eagles of Russia.'" Although cowardice included implications of masculine inadequacy, jokes directed against frontline women were explicitly gendered. Yakushin, 89-90.

<sup>159</sup> Recollections of Pavel B. Vinnik in *A my s toboi, brat, iz pekhoty* [And we are with you, brother, from the infantry], ed. Artem Drabkin (Moscow: Iauza, 2012), 63.

they formed the core of the unit.<sup>160</sup> Whether the odds of survival were three or thirty out of one hundred, many troops still fighting in 1945 responded by drawing closer to their comrades at the expense of correspondence with family. An artilleryman explained why he chose silence:

I thought that, when I was fighting, it was completely inappropriate to write [home]. Imagine that you wrote a letter, sent it, and after a few days were killed or badly wounded. They would receive the letter at home, think you were alive and healthy, fighting around such and such a city, but you were already dead. I promised myself that I would write only when I was off the battle line... For my parents, obviously, this was difficult.<sup>161</sup>

After liberation, the prospect of death seemed to worsen soldiers' sense of distance from their loved ones, because their death was no longer essential to the defense or liberation of family members, but an isolated event. As a result, fighters forged closer bonds to those with whom they retained feelings of mutual dependence: the members of their combat collective.

Red Army troops' increasing affiliation with their front comrades at the expense of ties to their biological families appears vividly in their recollections of the final months of the war. Some men considered the two of equal value, in contrast to the impulse to abandon their post when family distress required them to return home. An infantryman discussed the relative significance of ties to home and front: "They were both important for a person, for a fighter, for a soldier: relatives and that small group, on which he depends in battle. However, there would be a time when [the latter] will pull him to safety. [Therefore,] I would give the advantage to the one group."<sup>162</sup> He was not alone, as other soldiers emphasized the late war unity of their combat groups in the language of family: "My crew was a family unto itself. Of course, much depended on the commander and the character of the crew members, but in the majority of cases, *and absolutely at the end*, the crew shared a united goal, and was [like a] single person. It never

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<sup>160</sup> Mikhail B. Levin in Drabkin (2012), 173.

<sup>161</sup> Recollections of Aleksandr V. Rogachev in *Ia Dralsia S Pantservaffe* [I fought against the German tank forces], ed. Artem Drabkin (Moscow: Iauza, 2007), 345-346.

<sup>162</sup> Recollections of Vladimir T. Evdokimov in Drabkin (2012), 28-29.

happened, that one or two did something, and the others sat and watched while smoking cigarettes. Everyone worked together.”<sup>163</sup> Not all made such direct comparisons, but other soldiers described their comrades in ways that elevated them to the level of family: “The most frightening thing at the front was to lose your unit. Then you had to start a new life!”<sup>164</sup> For many soldiers, the likening of small unit cohesion to a familial relationship, no longer simply a coexistent brotherhood, expressed a final shift in reaction to conditions of service and sustaining motivation.<sup>165</sup>

The intensification of soldierly bonds amidst a new battlefield context led rank-and-file soldiers to alter their behavior and norms regarding sexual conduct. Part of the shift stemmed from soldiers’ resentment of ongoing hardships after years of observing how “the leadership always lived better [than us]. Almost every single one had a field wife.”<sup>166</sup> By late-1944, foreign women provided the troops with their own sexual opportunities, and many Red Army men, like artilleryman Petr Mikhin in Hungary, saw romantic liaisons as a well-deserved relief from hardship: “I was accustomed to seeing only the filthy padded pants of combat soldiers, and now the sight of bare female calves seemed like a dream.”<sup>167</sup> Such opportunities arose for soldiers in Eastern Europe thanks to the very issue that had limited their options earlier: their combatant status, as evidenced by local women’s comments in Poland: “No,” replied the woman, ‘there are many women here from the neighboring farms; they came to have a look at your soldiers.’ We did not

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<sup>163</sup> Recollections of Nikolai K. Shishkin in Drabkin (2007), 313.

<sup>164</sup> When mentioning his father’s death, the veteran expresses no such feelings, nor mentions the loss in terms of severe consequences. Recollections of Vinnik, in Drabkin (2012), 63.

<sup>165</sup> As Lynn theorizes, “Reactions to service conditions arise from the circumstances themselves and from the state of mind that soldiers bring to these circumstances. ...Enduring danger, discomfort, and privation may, within limits, strengthen resolve if that endurance is applauded. ...The soldier who feels ignored or condemned by society, however, may still consider his efforts worthwhile if he sees them as justified and appreciated by his military unit, i.e., if *esprit de corps* is high.” He further explains that for the soldier fully integrated into military life, “his real family has become the small group of comrades around him. They are his ultimate judge and support.” Lynn, 29-35.

<sup>166</sup> Recollections of Mikhail F. Borisov in Drabkin (2007), 122.

<sup>167</sup> Mikhin, 195.

stay and spoil their party; in such circumstances a soldier can find things to talk about without a general to help him.”<sup>168</sup> Beyond women’s interest and officers’ acquiescence, reduced frontline duty obligations between offensives provided the rank-and-file with more time to pursue relationships, as an episode in the Czech lands suggests: “Vasia and I met two girlfriends who lived almost on the outskirts of Horive, which was located 3-4 kilometers from our camp. Very often we went to visit with them in the evenings.”<sup>169</sup> A new set of norms around sexual conduct thus emerged at the front in late 1944, so that Red Army fighters no longer condemned sexual relationships with women as disruptive to the fighting collective. Instead, the liberation of settlements depopulated of adult men allowed Soviet troops to pursue women alongside their comrades.

Amidst these developments in frontline culture, Red Army troops’ motives to continue fighting reflected the isolation from home that many felt after advancing into foreign territory. Greater tolerance for self-interest affected motivation, just as it had with sexual values, leading to petty looting by the Red Army rank-and-file on a massive scale, most notably of watches. A Georgian rifleman questioned his comrades’ actions, while noting the anxiety about death that accompanied late-war opportunity: “Don’t you know, that you might be killed in half an hour, and then what will those watches be good for?”<sup>170</sup> The fear of death as an unnecessary sacrifice existed not only in the abstract, but also in the continued loss of comrades, which meant that revenge continued to drive soldiers. A heightened sense of loyalty to comrades and the combat collective sustained troops such as scout Volodia Kornilov: “We are already in the “lair” and with greater strength make the Germans pay for our fallen comrades. We, scouts, were five men, now three, but our [kill] count to avenge Venia’s death has reached 16 German soldiers, and I

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<sup>168</sup> Vasilii Chuikov, *Padenie Berlina* [The Fall of Berlin] (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1965), 88.

<sup>169</sup> Moniushko, 197.

<sup>170</sup> Nikolai I. Charashvili in Drakbin (2012), 282.

don't think we will stop there. [When] we are killed, so will other comrades take revenge for us, and for Venia.”<sup>171</sup> Revenge remained a powerful motive after remuneration emerged among prominent sources of combat motivation, and both reflected soldiers' renewed focus on their frontline circumstances.<sup>172</sup> Soldiers' interest in remuneration also reflected the growth in self-interested and individualistic attitudes otherwise manifest in the evolution of sexual norms among the rank-and-file.

Red Army soldiers' perpetration of rape in enemy territory emerged as an escalation and convergence of these post-liberation trends: frontline troops' feelings of isolation and anxiety, an evolution in sexual norms, and combat motivation centered on revenge and remuneration.<sup>173</sup> For some, the only benefit of fighting beyond Soviet frontiers was the possibility of a more comprehensive revenge, as a cavalryman recalled euphemistically: “I think we can send our NKVD officer on holiday now. There is an unspoken order that every soldier should follow his heart on enemy territory. If someone would like to take revenge, you should shut your eyes to it.”<sup>174</sup> Just as such an “unspoken order” could refer to non-sexual violence, possible motives for the rape of enemy women extended beyond revenge. Some Red Army men directly asserted women's motivational value as sexual spoils of war.<sup>175</sup> A scout recalled how a commander

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<sup>171</sup> Given the date of the letter, the author means to say that his unit has entered Germany, rather than Berlin. Letter of V.A. Kornilov to Nina Vokhovsaia regarding the death of her brother, Vekiamin, 29 January 1945. RGASPI M-33 Opis 1 Delo 596 List 5.

<sup>172</sup> Remuneration as a means of ensuring soldiers' compliance exists alongside coercive and normative ones, and all three usually operate together in varied combinations, and includes any number of “resources and rewards, such as land, pay, or booty.” Remuneration tends to encourage self-interests about other concerns, further weakening normative approaches. Lynn, 23-25.

<sup>173</sup> The issue of wartime rape is difficult to deal with in any military, and especially one that undertook minimal reporting and sealed its records, such as the Red Army. Among soldiers' discussions of the issue, wartime letters as a rule never do more than hint at frontline sex of any kind, and usually in the less commonly preserved sub-set of correspondence between comrades. That leaves memoirs and oral history interviews as the main account. These texts show a considerable amount of consistency when they discuss rape, but commonly contain a considerable amount of obfuscation and denial, and never any personal admissions, only observations of others.

<sup>174</sup> Yakushin, 147.

<sup>175</sup> Although its precedents stretch back into antiquity, medieval warfare involved the systematic targeting of civilians, including the rape of women, both as a tactic and as a form of plunder that motivated soldiers and knights

informally encouraged his riflemen before battle in Hungary: “Men! Ahead of you is a city, and there is as much wine and women there as you desire”<sup>176</sup> The two motives could also coincide, which was something an infantryman discovered during an encounter near Danzig: ““What sort of indecisive twits are you? Her husband is fighting against you, but you’re leaving her alone? Look: she’s blood with milk!’ The scouts briefly conferred, then raped the first German officer’s wife, then the other young woman.”<sup>177</sup> These discussions or suggestions of rape illustrate the dual role official sanction and comradely norms played in the permissive atmosphere that prevailed in the Red Army regarding sexual violence against German women.

The open way soldiers discussed rape in small groups speaks to the front’s figurative distance from the prewar taboo status of sex and the extent frontline norms had changed after condemning such behavior among officers only a year earlier. Talk about sexual exploits served as a new marker of status among comrades, which campfire discussions considered in detail:

Chuckling, they were sharing their opinions about German women. Each man told the others, as if giving a report, about the victories he had scored on the sexual front. Kondrat had experienced six women. Pas’ko had taken advantage of four. “An old buzzard” had fallen to Pavel’s lot, but another had been “quite painfully young.” Ivan complained about bad luck: “one stinking old lady.” Nil, as he put it, had “made fully a dozen women happy.” “You’re lucky,” Ivan sighed heavily. “I tramped across all of Poland and still remained a virgin.” Everybody burst out laughing. ... Comparing German women to Polish women, everyone came to a general conclusion: the Polish women were more sexually dexterous, lively, and passionate. “The German women are so painfully cold and dry. They lie there beneath you totally without moving, only “Oh!” and gasps – they’re so quiet, it’s as if God himself has taken their speech away.”<sup>178</sup>

While typical in its focus on sex, these soldiers’ campfire discussion of rape reveals that the number of a fighter’s sex partners affected his status, although success on the ‘sexual front’ did

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alike. John Lynn, *Battle: A History Of Combat And Culture*, revised edition (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 89. Rape also receives mention in Soviet literature about the civil war as an inevitable part of a soldier’s life at war. Borenstein, 60.

<sup>176</sup> “Ребята! Впереди город, а там вина, баб сколько хош” in Temkin, 201.

<sup>177</sup> Litvin, 121.

<sup>178</sup> Gorbachevsky, 373-374.

not override military contributions. The extreme ages of Soviet men's victims reflects the sexualization of women in frontline culture that began in 1942, so that sex became the default relationship some members of the rank and file had, or at least expected, from all women they encountered abroad. Neither revenge nor rape received direct mention in the conversation, and yet the discussion strongly implies that these were integral to the soldiers' sexual encounters. Veteran soldiers such as these were inevitably exposed to the ideas and practices of Soviet women's coerced consent in sexual relationships with Soviet officers earlier in the war. In those scenarios, a level of coercion consistently prefigured such liaisons, and prompted virtually no reaction in the unit or by superiors, unless they had a competing relationship with the woman. It is quite probable then, that the combination of sexual abstinence and officers' coercion of women at the pre-liberation front, the moral isolation from home post-liberation, and revenge helped diminish or eliminate consent as a concern for Red Army men on foreign soil.

Troops' reactions to comrades' acts of rape reveal the extent of change in frontline norms and the role of sex with enemy women in strengthening masculine affiliation among the Red Army rank-and-file. Red Army fighters primarily evaluated the impact of rape on their fellow soldiers, not their female victims. A popular anecdote approvingly explained that after thirty-three Soviet soldiers raped a German woman, "General Kotikov, the chief of the Political Department... shook his head especially wondering about those who were at the tail end of the line of rapists. Nevertheless, the criminal case had been dropped."<sup>179</sup> Among immediate comrades, venereal disease provided a means to invert victimization without criticizing the masculine impulses of men who pursued sex recklessly, as a tanker recalled:

Everyone was warned that it was risky to 'have relations' with these women because of the danger of getting a venereal disease. Nevertheless, our [fuel] truck drivers were special brothers – you had to hold on to them with both hands.

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<sup>179</sup> Nikolai I. Safonov in Drakbin (2009), 183.

...Once in our camp I walked by the medical detachment and saw our driver Borodin sitting outside on the stairs. He greeted me and complained “Oh, I didn’t obey your warning and now I’m climbing up the wall.”<sup>180</sup>

Sympathetic reactions to rapists in the ranks reflected soldiers’ existing affiliation with the combat collective and the masculine values it espoused even as some behavioral norms evolved.

The long-established frontline culture of apathy surrounding coerced sex and rape across the fighting ranks helps explain the widespread dehumanization of women as sex objects as well as Red Army commanders’ difficulty in enforcing anti-rape regulations. Another tanker recalled the playful way in which soldiers discussed such matters, as he described a comrades’ public pursuit of sex in a town in East Prussia: “some sergeant major was escorting about 300 German females down the street. Zhora was ogling the women. The sergeant major called out to him, ‘Go ahead and take the cutest one!’” Taking the advice at face value, Zhora raped the woman and acquired chlamydia in the process, but his comrades covered up the crime and the illness, since it took place after a decree that sent any man seeking treatment to a penalty battalion. With official sanctions circumvented, Zhora faced consequences in the social realm, carried out by the combat collective, and reflecting its values: “He was teased over this for quite some time later: ‘You’re a fool! You should have chosen the ugliest one – you would have gotten away with it!’”<sup>181</sup> Quite possibly around a campfire of their own, his comrades reacted not to the rape itself, or even its potential impact of his illness on combat readiness, but his inexperience in targeting a victim. The Red Army rank-and-file’s norms for sexual behavior and rape at war’s end constituted a culmination of masculine trends in frontline culture and individual soldiers’ subjectivities.

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<sup>180</sup> Recollections of Nikolai A. Guzhva in Drabkin (2012), 207.

<sup>181</sup> The penalty battalion punishment, although for sexual fraternization and its impact on military readiness, not rape, was not an all-army policy, and may have reflected the greater difficulty of replacing tank crew members, relative to infantry. Zhora was the nickname that gun layer Zakiy Gityatullin received from his comrades as a sign of belonging as well as means of providing him with a more Slavic-sounding name. Vasiliy Krysov, *Panzer Destroyer* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2010), 203.



Whether approvingly observed or directly perpetrated, actions that not only excluded women, but were directed against them, served as motivation and reinforced group bonds for many Soviet fighting men.

While the personal motives and reasoning of an individual rapist are difficult to assess with any certainty, in part due to the unwillingness of perpetrators to admit their actions, a clear pattern emerges from comrades' reactions and observations. Throughout the three year evolution of Red Army troops' views about sex, women consistently appeared as sex objects and that sexualized image trivialized their contributions at the front. Frontline fighters mocked women in the ranks as sex workers seeking special treatment and criticized officers who pursued women more than victory, which bonded the rank-and-file against womanizing officers and Red Army servicewomen alike.<sup>182</sup> The continuation of the war after liberation, which diminished reasons for self-sacrifice and increased opportunities for sex, contributed to soldiers' adaptation of officers' values, including low standards for women's consent. Just as soldiers learned to tolerate comrades' pursuit of consensual sexual relationships, their tolerance of rape marked a change that preserved the masculine hierarchy of roles in the war effort, thus operating according to the adaptive nature of a masculine bloc.<sup>183</sup> This process saw disgust for officers' antics disappear into celebration of comrades' sexual prowess as a masculine virtue, which bore little resemblance to the prudish sexuality of the New Soviet Man in the 1930s or even the less sex-averse Red Army soldier of the Civil War era.<sup>184</sup> While ideas of honor mattered to Soviet troops, there is too little evidence to suggest a centuries-old Russian way of war motivated men

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<sup>182</sup> This constitutes a gendered variant of the type of elitism that closely bonded military units in wartime. Lynn, 30.

<sup>183</sup> Demetriou, 355.

<sup>184</sup> Antony Beevor argues that soldiers' raped because of the views on sex they developed in the 1930s, not in spite of them. Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (New York, 2003), 32. Eliot Borenstein notes that rape figured into the sexual practices of civil war masculinity, but sex remained a very limited part of Red Army combat collectives' concerns. Borenstein, 60.

from seventeen to twenty two years of age to rape German women as a form of medieval insult.<sup>185</sup> Alongside a general disregard for foreign women's rights, the top-down transmission of sexual norms helps explain why efforts to combat rape had limited effect: officers tasked with enforcement saw rape as non-issue as long as it did not disrupt operations, and fighting men protected each other out of a sense of combatant solidarity even when it did.

## **Conclusion**

The final year of the war served as the culmination of many trends in frontline culture, as well as the military campaign against Germany. Examining post-liberation frontline culture through the lens of masculine subjectivities and ideals reveals the persistence of personal relationships and local collectivities in shaping many soldiers' responses to the role of conqueror. Liberation altered what was at stake for the Red Army, and the false dawn it brought soldiers intensified the importance of their comrades and primary group values in the masculine subjectivities they expressed. In official rhetoric, liberation removed the final barrier to focusing primarily on Stalin's paternal leadership and the pursuit of postwar objectives. Responses from above and below set off on what were in most respects divergent trajectories for the final time in mid-1944. However, they shared a common set of masculine values, fitting the model of the masculine bloc, which shaped how each engaged women and expressed power.<sup>186</sup>

Frontline culture in the final year of conflict reacted strongly against women's growing presence in the Red Army, which soldiers and official rhetoric expressed through both prewar revivals and wartime innovations to sustain and legitimate their power.<sup>187</sup> Troops' reaction to

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<sup>185</sup> On the potential influence of a centuries-old patriarchy-derived Russian way of war, see Naimark, 113-115.

<sup>186</sup> On the masculine bloc as means of understanding how multiple masculinities coexist while preserving men's power over women, see Demetriou, 348.

<sup>187</sup> Gender theorist Michael S. Kimmel asserts that any study of war and gender "must chart the ways in which meanings of manhood have changed over the course of a war." Michael S. Kimmel, *The History of Men* (Albany, 2005), 3.

the success of liberation reveals gendered subjectivities that accepted the official rhetoric of feminine dependency while ignoring the goals of the national war effort in favor of family loyalty. Although I acknowledge the relevance of ideological inspiration and state control over the language of social identification, I argue these soldiers' petitions for leave demonstrate creativity and individuality without resisting or opposing Stalinism. This argument broadens Anna Krylova's assertion about Soviet women's agency in self-construction to include male soldiers as active agents, even though they faced much less ambiguity in official expectations or masculine ideals in wartime.<sup>188</sup>

Stalin's return to preeminence in mid-1944 hearkened back to the propaganda of the 1930s, in which he served as father-mentor to individual heroes as well as paternal leader to the country.<sup>189</sup> However, I argue that the return or revival remained incomplete not only in terms of soldiers' views of the war effort, which remained independent, but also frontline propaganda itself.<sup>190</sup> The latter remained unstable, particularly after the level of Red Army marauding and looting on enemy territory reached a point that it warranted a front page editorial. Stalin's authority or example received no mention amidst the call for restraint and discipline in the ranks, which is significant because it shows the enduring power of war to disrupt official narratives, even on the eve of victory.

The official gender ideals of the late war resonated much more strongly with the Red Army rank-and-file. While the war enabled Soviet women to gain what might be described as "emancipation on loan" in the words of a historian of women's wartime gains elsewhere, the final months of the war revealed the reversible nature of women's possibilities and Soviet

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<sup>188</sup> Krylova has recently made this case in response to what she terms an "impasse in the discussion on subjectivity," *Soviet Women in Combat*, 25-26.

<sup>189</sup> On Stalin's role as father to hero sons, see Clark, 119-127. On his paternal care, see Chatterjee, 135-140.

<sup>190</sup> Jeffrey Brooks' study of civilian-oriented wartime newspapers detected an unqualified return to prewar rhetoric in 1943. Brooks, 159-194.

military-heroic gender scripts, which downplayed women's contributions to not only the war effort but also to victory.<sup>191</sup> Soviet official rhetoric and male combatants asserted their status in the war effort as power over women. Official rhetoric validated Soviet policies in gendered terms, whereby the paternal care of the Stalinist state not only provided for women and children at home, but facilitated the metahuman fertility of "Mother Heroines." This depiction of Soviet women erased their wartime contributions and made them dependent while simultaneously validating the continued demands on Red Army soldiers and their role in the national family. For their part, soldiers asserted superior male capacity to sacrifice, act in solidarity, and endure hardship, as well as women's use of disruptive sexuality to undermine those traits, as the basis for excluding women from combat collectives. Officers and then soldiers preferred to consider frontline women as sexual partners, or at best non-combat helpers, rather than equals.<sup>192</sup> This backlash ended the debate between Soviet traditionalist and egalitarian views about female military service that began in 1917 in favor of the traditionalists, thus laying the foundation for postwar recruitment policies and popular memory of the war until after Stalin's death.<sup>193</sup>

The Red Army's perpetration of rape during this period marks a culmination of several of these wartime trends, as does the limited reaction of military officials. Rapists among Red Army soldiers acted on the worst possible combination of elements of frontline culture: officers' non-consensual approach sex partners, soldiers' view that sex was legitimate as long as it did not harm comrades, remuneration as a legitimate motive after liberation, feelings of isolation and fear about returning home, and a combatant solidarity to small units and primary groups that insulated them from external discipline or morals. Other soldiers raped without this combination

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<sup>191</sup> Kathleen Canning, *Gender History in Practice* (Ithaca, 2006), 46.

<sup>192</sup> For a discussion of romance as a limited phenomenon at the front and minimal part of women's experiences in the Red Army, see Krylova, 259-288.

<sup>193</sup> On the debate between traditionalists in the Red Army and egalitarian advocates in civil defense organizations (Vsevoluch), see Sanborn, 146-160.

of views and values, but Red Army fighters' immersion in such a frontline culture affected their willingness to rape more than prewar views and taboos about sex in Soviet civilian culture.<sup>194</sup>

In the larger context of allied forces' rape of civilian women during the Second World War, to say nothing of Axis forces' atrocities, the Red Army appears as the worst, rather than only perpetrator. Military officials documented multiple cases of units of the British military that raped women in Germany and the Pacific theatre, while French forces raped and looted in Italy and Germany to the great alarm of their Anglo-American counterparts.<sup>195</sup> US servicemen raped civilian women beginning with their pre-combat deployment to England, and continued to rape French and German civilians once engaged in fighting.<sup>196</sup> Of course, the number of victims totaling only several thousand scarcely compares to estimates of Red Army sexual atrocities. Both US and Soviet soldiers' conditions of service impacted their attitudes toward women and sexual violence, but serious US military concern for, and investigation of those crimes, however flawed, seems to have had a limiting effect absent on the Eastern Front.<sup>197</sup> Ultimately, the implications of rape in the Red Army still retained relevance closer to home, since both state and soldier had a stake in forgetting their involvement with women during the war.

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<sup>194</sup> For the argument that soldiers' raped because of the views on sex they developed in the 1930s alone, see Beevor, 32. For the explanation that Red Army soldiers raped primarily out of revenge, see Anita Grossman, *Jews, Germans, and Allies* (Princeton, 2007), 55.

<sup>195</sup> Max Hastings, *Inferno: The World at War, 1939-1945* (New York: Vintage, 2011), 399, 446.

<sup>196</sup> J. Robert Lilly, *Taken By Force: Rape and American GIs in Europe during WWII* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>197</sup> Military justice even received criticism from civilian newspapers and leaders for the perceived harshness of it punishment of US servicemen when Germans were the victims or main witnesses testifying. Lilly, 179-183.

### CONCLUSION: DEFENDING MASCULINE DUTY

War reveals the complexity and adaptability of official rhetoric and troops' persistent reshaping of it. While soldier-specific propaganda always emphasized strategic aims and mobilization priorities, it provided fighting men with means to claim personal benefits from the state or express their superiority over combat-shy military superiors. The masculine values and language of heroism, skill, revenge, and fighting brotherhood enabled the Red Army rank-and-file to express individual priorities and personal loyalties within the wartime lexicon of patriotic motives and foreign policy goals. Military propagandists and political workers presented heroes as models of soldierly subjectivity and combat behavior, but could not control how military readers interpreted them through the lens of their own frontline experiences. The frontline context changed both the ideals of collective duty and the masculine subjectivity of citizens-turned-combatants.

The relationship between soldiers' masculine subjectivities and the scripts and models of selfhood available in official rhetoric examined in this study reveals a creative and fluid process. This relationship confirms Anna Krylova's findings that the ambiguous cultural and institutional realms of Stalinism did not provide individuals with ready-made identities to strive to become.<sup>1</sup> While male soldiers' participation in military service was largely obligatory, their response to mobilization, training, and combat reveals a gradual and non-linear process of reorienting themselves away from home and toward the front. The latter destination only emerged as a possibility after a period of exposure to front life, soldier-specific propaganda, and the social context of a combat unit. Soldiers' ambivalent response to heroic figures in front propaganda and community-building among fellow fighters suggests serious limits to Soviet citizens'

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 24-27.

determination to personify a collectively affiliated ideal Soviet person as Jochen Hellbeck has identified among Soviet citizens in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> Red Army fighters' masculine subjectivities developed around personal experiences at the front and the values of small combat groups, but were influenced by official ideas, especially the masculine ethic of national defense and a diluted valorization of sacrifice and hardship. Violence loomed large in several stages of soldiers' experience of the war, including the initiation of combat, the vengeance that emerged from comradeship and loss, and the perpetration of rape in the war's final months.<sup>3</sup> Situating these violent tendencies reveals them to be a product of the wartime context and the frontline culture that developed through combat collectives. Overall, troops' values, motives, and norms rarely shared many common features with heroes celebrated in *Krasnaia Zvezda*, but their belief in the overall cause and commitment to their comrades kept them fighting. Future research may build on these findings by considering how differences between official scripts and gendered subjectivities indicate responses to Soviet policies, ideals, or the system itself.

In his recent study of Soviet wartime newspaper propaganda, Karel Berkhoff has suggested that Soviet wartime propaganda succeeded in controlling the image of military events and created a single winning narrative of the war's purpose.<sup>4</sup> Catherine Merridale has likewise suggested that propaganda successfully persuaded and inspired soldiers to fight after coercion failed to rally them.<sup>5</sup> A two-phase characterization of Soviet propaganda underlies these and most studies of the subject, dividing the war between a relaxed and popularly-infused first half,

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<sup>2</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Amir Weiner, "Something to Die For, a Lot to Kill for," in *The Barbarization of Warfare*, ed. George Kassimeris (New York, 2006), 101-125; Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 113-115. For the argument that soldiers raped because of the views on sex they developed in the 1930s alone, see Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2003), 32. For the explanation that Red Army troops raped primarily out of revenge, see Anita Grossman, *Jews, Germans, and Allies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Karel C. Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 65, 277.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War* (New York: Picador, 2006), 63-65, 229-230.

and a triumphal and Stalin-centered second half.<sup>6</sup> The responsiveness and specificity of propaganda published in *Krasnaia Zvezda* during the war demonstrates that official rhetoric could target different messages to different audiences and address a vast array of issues, as depictions of soldier heroes did at the front. Moreover, soldier-specific propaganda modulated Stalin's role and adapted elements of 1930s culture throughout the war, revealing a propaganda system much less reliant on a sentimental style in the years of defeat, and a much more cautious one in the years of victory. Total control of the war narrative certainly eluded Soviet propagandists, who never managed to anticipate soldiers' responses to wartime change, or prevent a large-scale loss of combat effectiveness from taking place in three of the war's four years. This study of the interaction between propaganda and its audience reveals that Red Army troops consistently expressed motives and ideas of duty before they became official, and likewise appropriated terms such as brotherhood without retaining their connotations of collectivist duty. That said, their shared masculine perspective blurred the distinctions between official and soldierly versions of the masculine ethic of defense, the need for personal sacrifice, and the necessity of conquest, even if not one precisely shared. Future research may well test the extent of popular influence on official rhetoric or examine whether other forms of propaganda compartmentalization took place, and how they change scholars' understanding of the relationship between official rhetoric and individual subjectivities.

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<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), chapter 7; Richard Stites, "Introduction," in *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*, ed. Richard Stites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 4-5; John Barber, "The Image of Stalin in Soviet Propaganda and Public Opinion during World War 2," in *World War 2 and the Soviet People*, ed. John Garrard et al. (London: St. Marten's Press, 1993); Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat*, chapter 6. For an early effort to challenge this periodization, see Lisa Kirschenbaum, "Our City, Our Homes, Our Families: Local Loyalties and Private Life in Soviet World War II Propaganda," *Slavic Review* 59 no. 4 (2000).



The title of Catherine Merridale's article posed the question "Masculinity at war: Did gender matter in the Soviet Army?"<sup>7</sup> She replies in the negative, with some qualification, explaining that other factors, such as age, nationality, and especially rank, mattered more. The character of relations among men and between men and women at the front, the portrayal of men and women in soldier specific propaganda, and the ways in which soldiers' views and official rhetoric interacted all demonstrate the significance of gender in shaping soldierly subjectivities and describing and justifying hierarchies of power. This study diverges with Anna Krylova's otherwise persuasive examination of the centrality of Soviet women soldiers' gendered subjectivities in their war experience over three issues. The first is how men received women into their ranks, second is why mobilization policy changed to allow women to enter military training and frontline combat, and the third is how prewar culture contributed to these two wartime developments. After 22 June 1941, the Red Army remained a site of the masculine values of national defense and exclusive male comradeship continuing from the Russian Civil War experience that Joshua Sanborn and Eliot Borenstein have examined.<sup>8</sup> Fighting men's responses reveal the incongruity between women's new military status and the persistence of old gender ideas surrounding military service, which had not changed as quickly as policy, even among the younger generation of servicemen. The soldier figure, rather than a specific composite of exploits and motives, seemed to operate as a hegemonic masculine ideal, and maintained that status across soldiers' and propagandists' divergent iterations through the masculine bloc dynamic.<sup>9</sup> The masculine soldier operated in counter-distinction to women and other men,

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<sup>7</sup> Catherine Merridale, "Masculinity at war: Did gender matter in the Soviet army?" *Journal of War and Culture Studies* Vol. 5 No. 3 (2012): 310-313.

<sup>8</sup> Joshua Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002); Eliot Borenstein, *Men without Women* (Raleigh: Duke University Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Demetrakis Z. Demetriou, "Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity: A critique," *Theory and Society*, Vol. 30 No. 3 (2001).

which soldier-specific propaganda preserved by omitting coverage of fighting age men outside the military, along with that of capable and integrated enemy-killing women combatants. Future research may seek out new contexts in Soviet history in which a masculine bloc dynamic mediated differences among official rhetoric, masculine subjectivities, and women's status or roles in Soviet society.

Most aspects of Red Army frontline culture reflected the autonomous norms, loyalties, and practices of soldiers' combat collectives. Troops' actions in combat and interpretations of those events diverged from the narratives of frontline propaganda, and often from their own commanders' expectations. Soldiers' subjectivities developed from their experiences and observations of each other and the enemy, which provided them a perspective few political workers, let alone those in the rear, could appreciate. These citizen-soldiers' subjectivity also carried strong elitist undercurrents which involved the exclusion of many would-be comrades from their groups. Such elite troops were aware of their distinct role in the war effort and Soviet society, so that even non-combatants emphasized their soldierly character and sought medals and other markers of front status, even as they systematically avoided its dangerous drawbacks. For both sets of Red Army servicemen, the front was a special place that raised their status in the hierarchy of Soviet society. Despite the internal division between combatant and non-combatant servicemen, most seemed to experience life and death at the front as a unique aspect of the Soviet war effort.

Soviet women's presence at the front also reveals the exclusive and hierarchical character of men's combat collectives. While men and women both combined and reconfigured official scripts and models of Soviet citizenship regarding war, they did so in dramatically different ways. Building on their early experiences of leaving home and writing female relatives from the

front, fighting men's views of themselves and their primary groups developed in opposition to women. Whether providing medical care, support services, or another gun in the trench, women all too often suffered denigration and sexual harassment from the men in their units. While women's experiences varied dramatically, total acceptance was rare, and few men did not think of women in the ranks differently, even if they behaved respectfully. Some of this hostility stemmed from prewar Stalinist values, but much of it came from soldiers' belief in a masculine ethic of military service to defend women, which prejudiced many men against the logic or effectiveness of women soldiers joining their ranks.

The development and responsiveness of official rhetoric to wartime events reveal the challenges that total war posed to the Soviet propaganda system. Foremost among these challenges was the uncontrollable variable of enemy action, which could not be managed as easily as the coverage of civilian economic efforts or struggles against internal enemies. More significant still was the firsthand knowledge and sobering reality of frontline conditions that soldiers regularly encountered as an alternative to official reports and assessments. The result was an immediate split between soldier-specific and civilian propaganda, which included the creation of a network of division- and army-level newspapers to provide material all along the front. Soldier-specific propaganda consistently provided soldiers and political workers with a narrative of correct motives, correct tactics, and correct expectations for the war. Heroes provided the primary vessel through which propaganda conveyed these messages. The fluid and unpredictable nature of the war's strategic balance meant changing these heroes as models of masculinity, which soldier-specific propaganda usually did at roughly six-month intervals. There were two other distinguishing features of soldier-specific propaganda. The first was Stalin's consistent presence and connection to the Red Army, including roles such as provider of

strategy, friend to individual soldiers, and model for commanders' relationships to subordinates, among others. The second was the total absence of civilian men from coverage, except veterans beyond fighting age and political elites, in order to emphasize the definitive nature of soldiering as a masculine duty. Coverage of women functioned in an equally instrumental way, to emphasize their dependence and support, as well as occasional cases of ill-suited combat roles or tragic encounters with the enemy.

The changes to heroic ideals in soldier-specific propaganda suggest, but do not definitely prove, that soldiers influenced official rhetoric as well as being influenced by it. The vast numbers of classified documents on unit-level political work and moral may one day shed light on the exact uses of reports on soldiers' moods. They may also reveal any connection between such information and how and when the editorial board made changes to major themes in *Krasnaia Zvezda*. At present, declassified archival materials show three major episodes in which soldiers' mass indiscipline or insubordination prompted substantial changes in propaganda: The spring and early summer 1942 rout of Red Army forces that provoked Stalin to issue Order 227, the mid-1943 disorder among non-Slavic troops that led to large-scale translation and national hero promotion efforts, and the spring 1944 disorder and marauding that broke out among the first Soviet troops to wage war on enemy territory that prompted new disciplinary measures and regulations for combat troops operating in foreign lands. Separate from these instances, the soldiers' focus on combined family and national defense goals, commitment to comradeship, desire for revenge, and disillusionment with liberating foreign peoples all preceded changes over the same issues in official rhetoric. Without direct evidence, the reasons behind this relationship remain uncertain. The greatest point of convergence between official and personal narratives appeared in the shared and sustained framing of national defense and combat as male citizens'

exclusive duty. Despite other differences, sacrifice, revenge, comradeship, skilled shooting competitions, liberation, survival, and conquest all appeared as masculine undertakings. Both perspectives held that women almost never possessed the skills, toughness, or motives to carry out these tasks. Official rhetoric hierarchically linked the active, masculine role of fighting with Stalin's leadership and state power, while women represented the passive, feminine beneficiaries of Soviet power who contributed to the war effort by helping the men that fought to protect them. This common, overarching vision persisted in spite of women's mass entry into ranks in 1942.

Four years of total war changed the Red Army and the men who fought in it. The dynamics of change in frontline culture, both official and soldierly, especially in the final year of the conflict, foreshadowed how limited servicewomen's impact would be. Men's reaction to women's military service, and the comparable line in soldier specific propaganda, helps explain why women's impact on military structures would be no greater after the Second World War than it had been after the First World War. Laurie Stoff's assessment of 1918 describes 1945 equally well with only a few changed words:

The successful participation of women in combat roles did not, however, lead to general sexual integration of the Soviet armed forces. Rather, the precedent of general sexual integration that was established is one based on exceptionalism. The exigencies of war, the type of women who became soldiers, the political circumstances of revolution – all were considered to be extraordinary. Only these factors, or particular combinations of factors, made it temporarily acceptable for women to fight in Russia and the Soviet Union. In times of peace and social stability, their involvement in military endeavors became undesirable. Nor did women's military participation during World War I provide significant changes to conventional gender roles. ... Even the extreme example of women carrying out what was considered an exclusively masculine role was insufficient to overturn deeply entrenched conceptions of separate sexual spheres.<sup>10</sup>

Combat collectives' exclusionary masculine solidarity provided no alternative to the narrative of women's combat roles as exceptional in frontline propaganda. Established primary groups of

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<sup>10</sup> Laurie Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 203-204.

male soldiers included female members only in the rarest of circumstances. Despite women's greater numbers, more varied roles, and greater opportunities to showcase their skills, the end of the four year national crisis marked the end of the Red Army's temporary demonstration of women's martial capabilities. The combination of nearly silent frontline propaganda and hostile male comrades-in-arms not only undermined any possibility of permanent integration, but also helped shape a misogynistic popular memory of the war that nearly erased Soviet women's hard-won victories.

Despite the immediate postwar return of a male-only military, Red Army servicemen's wartime gains were in some respects no more long lasting than women's. At the front, fighting men could not only reinterpret or synthesize official scripts, but draw from new sources of information to affect the process of understanding the war and themselves as citizen-soldiers. However, their combat collectives and alternative perspectives relied on direct access to observations and experiences separate from the narratives of official rhetoric, which disappeared at war's end. While their experiences and achievements left an enduring impression on their sense of self, the circumstances that had made it possible could not return with them to civilian life. The distinctive possibilities of front life both challenged and enhanced the Soviet war effort, just as fighting men could express patriotic subjectivities that were dissonant with official rhetoric. The fact that masculine dominance remained a common bond speaks to its enduring significance in both the Red Army tradition and the larger foundations of Stalinist culture.

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